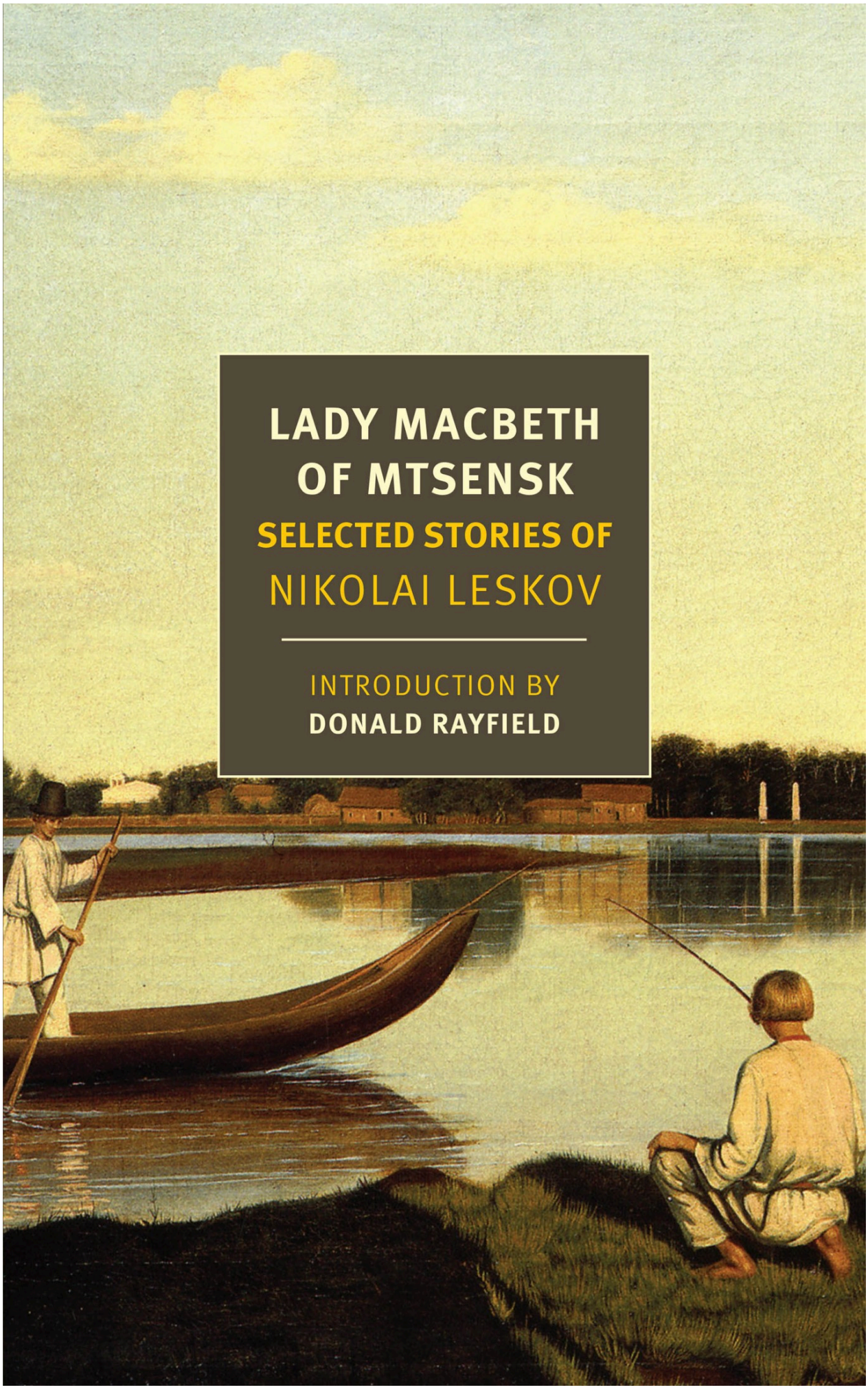
LADY MACBETH
OF MTSENSK
SELECTED STORIES OF
NIKOLAI LESKOV
INTRODUCTION BY
DONALD RAYFIELD

NIKOLAI LESKOV (1831–1895) was one of four children. His father had a clerical background and legal career; his mother was a gentlewoman. After a rudimentary education in the central Russian town of Oriol, Leskov moved to Kiev and worked for his English uncle whose firm transported serfs, livestock, and deadstock all over Russia. Leskov spent three years among the varied geography, peoples, and dialects of Russia; his reports to his uncle were so colorful that they were published as sketches. After moving to St. Petersburg, Leskov became a journalist and published stories and a novel, *No Exit* (1864), which infuriated radicals and the government alike. Success came in the mid-1870s with his novel *The Cathedral and Its Clergy* (1872) and long stories such as "The Enchanted Wanderer." He acquired a reputation as "the most Russian" of writers. Still, he earned so little that he became a government censor for a time. His personal life was a disaster: an early marriage ended with his wife's committal to a psychiatric hospital; his longtime companion bore him a son, but left him; a liaison with his servant resulted in a daughter whom he brought up but would not acknowledge. His work of the 1890s was often rejected by editors and censors. Only posthumously did his critical reputation become unassailable.

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LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK

Selected Stories of Nikolai Leskov

NIKOLAI LESKOV

Translated from the Russian by

DONALD RAYFIELD and others

Introduction by

DONALD RAYFIELD

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INTRODUCTION

FEW RUSSIAN writers had a background like Nikolai Leskov's. His paternal grandfather was a priest, and his father, Semion, worked his way into the gentry as a magistrate in the courts of the town of Oriol. But the family fortunes disintegrated: Semion's temper, as prickly as his son's, led to his early retirement; he ceded Nikolai's upbringing to one brother-in-law after another: first, to a man so jealous that at night he tied his wife's leg to the bedstead, but who did provide Nikolai with French and German tutors. Then the uncle died, and the widowed aunt married a Hercules, reputed in the Napoleonic Wars to have pulled two French cavalrymen off their horses and killed them by banging their heads together. This uncle sent Nikolai to a Dickensian local school, which he attended for two years before being expelled for misbehavior.

At sixteen, Leskov began working as a court clerk. A year later his father died of cholera, and the family's estate burned to the ground. He and his brother (later to become a doctor) moved to Kiev, staying with another maternal uncle, who housed them in an attic and barred them from the dinner table, but let Nikolai finish his education. Here Nikolai took an interest in Poles and Polish language, in Old Believers (the Orthodox dissenters), and in Jews, while earning a living as a civil servant. In 1857, another maternal uncle, an Englishman named Scott, began a new career: Scott and Wilkins was a firm that transported estates—peasants, livestock, and dead stock—from overpopulated central Russia to lands on the Volga and in the south. Nikolai spent three years traveling in Russia, sleeping in the open among the serfs he escorted, exposed to Russia's peasantry and ethnic minorities, their customs, religions, and languages, as no other writer was. Scott recommended Leskov publish his colorful business reports in the press.

When serfdom ended in the 1860s, peasants were no longer chattel: Scott and Wilkins went broke. Leskov became a journalist in an era of relative freedom. He was controversial, attacking corrupt police, doctors, and distilleries. Consequently, he was hounded out of the civil service. He settled in St. Petersburg, writing as Stebnitsky, a provocatively Polish pseudonym, given the anti-Polish feeling in Russia. He annoyed both the tsar and the new radicals by writing about fires that had plagued St. Petersburg: Leskov did not deny the government's accusation that revolutionaries had lit the fires, yet he accused the authorities of deliberately not extinguishing them. Leskov fled his critics for a year, touring western Russia and Europe.

In 1864, undeterred by hostility, Leskov returned and published an anti-revolutionary novel, *No Exit*, and, six years later, another caricature of socialists, *Daggers Drawn*. He soon realized that these novels made him hateful to the new generation and suspect to the older one. A decade passed before a series of superb novellas, three about dominant women, were hailed by readers and critics.

The most powerful of these novellas and Leskov's first claim to fame, "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" (1864), follows a device initiated by Turgenev in his stories "The Hamlet of Shchigry" and "King Lear of the Steppes": reenacting Shakespeare in contemporary Russia. The story owes nothing to Leskov's experience in Oriol's criminal court, although the eight-year-old Leskov did see there a woman publicly flogged before she was sent to Siberia for murdering her father-in-law with Shakespearean brutality by pouring hot sealing wax into his ear.

"Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" is Shakespearean in its linguistic vitality and emotional intensity. Leskov makes the story as harrowing as Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Although Leskov allows her no redemption, his murderess is driven by a sexual obsession, just as Dostoyevsky's murderer is motivated by an intellectual one. Leskov reportedly said, "While I was writing my 'Lady Macbeth,' the effect of overstrained nerves and isolation almost drove me to delirium. At times the horror became unbearable; my hair stood on end."

Like *Macbeth* itself, Leskov's story is closely knit. The plot is effectively propelled by a sequence of physical embraces and grapplings, which soon lead to Katerina's murderous embrace of her husband: "*In a single movement* she pushed Sergey out of the way, jumped at Zinovy Borisovich from behind, and, before he could reach the window, grabbed him by the throat with her slender fingers and threw him to the ground like a sheaf of newly cut hemp." A subsequent murder, this time of a small child—"*in one movement*, [she] covered the child's face with a large feather pillow and threw herself across it, her firm resilient bosom pressing down on the pillow"—leads to the work's tragic denouement. Found guilty of murder, Katerina Lvovna and Sergey are crossing the Volga with a detachment of convicts on their way to forced labor in Siberia. Katerina, abandoned by Sergey for a younger woman, twice flings herself on her rival: "without taking her eyes off the dark waves, she seized Sonetka by the legs and, *in a single*

movement, leaped overboard, taking Sonetka with her. [. . .] just then Katerina Lvovna appeared from another wave, rose almost waist-high above the water, and flung herself at Sonetka like a powerful pike attacking a roach. Neither of them was seen again."

In a single trajectory the work moves from the initial portrayal of Katerina Lvovna living a life of overwhelming boredom (*skuka*) to her final transformation into a pike (*shchuka*). Moved either by exalted love or by the basest of animal instincts, Katerina seems to know none of the contradictions and hesitations that are central to our humanity; everything she does, she does "in a single movement." The importance of the theme of animal instinct is further emphasized by the parallels and contrasts Leskov repeatedly draws between the behavior of his protagonists and that of a variety of animals: an imaginary pig, both real and imaginary cats, real dogs, a mouse, a nightingale, a quail, and crickets—as well as the perch and roach of the final paragraph.

In the words of David McDuff, one of the story's previous translators, "The narrative means, almost operatic in their simplicity and dramatic intensity (it is not hard to see why Shostakovich selected the tale for musical development in his *Katerina Izmailova*), are entirely merged with the stormy, passionate nature of the heroine."

On January 26, 1936, Stalin famously walked out of the Moscow production of Shostakovich's opera, which until then had been highly praised. On January 28, the article "Muddle Instead of Music" was published in *Pravda*, initiating a vicious campaign against Shostakovich and other artists. It is usually believed that Stalin disliked the opera because of its abrasive, dissonant modernism. One wonders whether Stalin might not have been equally alarmed by Leskov's and Shostakovich's evocation of the heroine's terrifying single-mindedness or, after the recent suicide of Stalin's second wife, by the desperate hatred she felt for her husband.

•

"Lady Macbeth" was one of twelve stories Leskov planned to write about Russian women in the provinces, "from the Oka to the Volga." Most remained unwritten, but female characters are often as strongly delineated as the male protagonists in Leskov's fiction in the late 1860s. Women and children loomed large in the author's life. Leskov, against his late father's advice, married in 1854: his wife, Olga, suffered from psychotic episodes (Leskov probably exacerbated them, not least by caricaturing Olga in his novel *No Exit* as a moronic socialist fanatic who "lied and wheedled and raged"), and from 1878 to her death in 1909 she was incarcerated at St. Nicholas, a psychiatric hospital, leaving Leskov to care for a daughter, Vera. In 1865 he took as a partner Ekaterina Bubnova, a mother of three boys. She lived with Leskov for ten years, gave birth to his son, Andrei, in 1866, and, after she was widowed, used the need to look after her children's inheritance as a pretext to leave Leskov and return to Kiev. Her eldest son, Nikolai Bubnov, stayed with Leskov in St. Petersburg, along with Andrei and Vera. Despite Leskov's protestations of undying love, Ekaterina Bubnova never returned. In 1879 he had a liaison with his Estonian housemaid, Ketti Kukk; a daughter, Varia, was born. Leskov insisted that Varia was an unrelated orphan and gave her the surname Dolina. Ketti Kukk left Leskov and was barred from seeing her daughter, so that Leskov became the sole charge of four children by three different women. The children suffered terribly from his rages: he flogged Andrei for the slightest misdemeanor at school, struck Varia for having her hair curled (she reacted with the words, "All you need are horns, then you'll be a total devil"), and tested Bubnov by buying him a coveted potted palm tree and then making him destroy it to prove his love for his stepfather. Nevertheless, Bubnov eventually became a professor and Andrei a Soviet army general, while Varia lived to nearly ninety.

After the failures of *No Exit* and *Daggers Drawn*, Leskov changed not only his subjects but his technique. He abandoned the city and its intellectuals and bureaucrats and turned to the clergy, the dissenters, the monks, the peasants and landowners of provincial Russia. Instead of a strongly plotted story told in the third person, he followed Turgenev's device of a storyteller entertaining a party of travelers with his life story. But Leskov went further, devising what would later be called *skaz*, a technique where the whole narrative is imbued with the speech habits, the "idiolect," of the narrator and his milieu, as exemplified in his greatest novel, one of the most memorable and original works of Russian literature, *The Cathedral and Its Clergy*, about the life of Father Tuberozov and his fellow clerics as they battle for the faith against cynical authorities and fashionable freethinkers. Like Anthony Trollope in *Barchester Towers* or *The Warden*, the novelist gives an insight deeper than any historian's into the workings of the national church; furthermore it shows Leskov to be as radical as he is conservative: priest and village atheist become allies in resisting the authoritarian machinations of St. Petersburg's bureaucrats. But Leskov reveals another unsuspected side: a lyrical, mystical interaction of man and nature. Here, Leskov anticipates Thomas Hardy. The novel breathes tolerance and understanding, in contrast to the

cantankerous personality of the author.

Even more compassionate, this time toward both Orthodox clergy and dissenting believers, was the novella “The Sealed Angel.” Subtitled “A Christmas Story,” it came as a bolt from the blue in January 1873: composed over six months, largely in the workshop of a friendly icon painter, it deals with a cooperative of Old Believer craftsmen, working for a foreign contractor, building an iron suspension bridge to connect Kiev across the Dnieper. Old Believers were sometimes tolerated, sometimes persecuted, exploited, even forcibly converted to the established church: once again, Leskov is radical in defending them and conservative in constructing a story, showing how miracles (again an encounter in a forest, and then a magical intervention as the hero crosses the half-built bridge in a snowstorm) bring reconciliation. The story is full of intriguing detail—how Russian craftsmen shorten English bolts that no hacksaw can cut, how icons are painted and how they can be forged, the network of Old Believers across the Russian provinces. Typically Leskovian are the benign English engineer and his wife, who support the Old Believers when their icon of the angel is confiscated and help them surreptitiously substitute a replica for the “sealed” genuine icon, without which the men cannot pray or work. Few Russian writers ever resisted mocking Germans, but Leskov, at least, was well-disposed to every other minority: Jews, Poles, Tatars, Gypsies, Bashkirs. He felt that “The Sealed Angel” was his best work, but he blamed conservative editors for pressing him to end the story “politically correctly” (which Dostoyevsky, too, found regrettable), making the Old Believers abjure their heresies. Left-wing critics were adamantly hostile, while Slavophiles and nationalists were delighted; the story was popular among all classes, right up to the Empress, who sent her adjutant to attend a reading at Leskov’s apartment.

Leskov now had a coterie of admirers, many influential. The tycoon Aleksei Suvorin was for the rest of Leskov’s life a supporter[1] and publisher, as he would be for Anton Chekhov and Vasili Rozanov. (Ironically, Suvorin had sarcastically reviewed “The Sealed Angel” as the “first work by this literary muckraker and fully qualified sycophant in which he forgets about the existence of evil-tongued nihilists.”) Now Leskov’s work had a wide readership, including those who considered all other lay literature immoral and those who never read book reviews. Meanwhile critics grumbled that “Leskov has the sort of literary reputation that makes praising him an act of boldness.”

The following year Leskov wrote and published “The Enchanted Wanderer,” a story that is his most original and impressive. This time, talking to a group of travelers, the hero relates his entire life, from tearaway serf boy to a wandering monk, a staggering variety of careers—postilion, horse trainer and selector, soldier, actor, monk, and prophet—taking in almost all Russia and its people, from the Arctic to the Black Sea, the enchanted warrior personifies the complex Russian ethnogenesis. The story begins with a discussion of suicides, if their souls can be prayed for and by whom: a subject that quietly brews through the rest of the narrative. This initial chapter caused an uproar: How dare Leskov denounce Archbishop Filaret’s insensitive refusal to pray for suicides, while a drunken parish priest persists in doing so? For at least fifteen years, “The Enchanted Wanderer” was better understood by Leskov’s ordinary readers than by his critics. The hero that emerges often seems callous and intolerant in his militant Christianity: the ghost of a monk whom he carelessly kills dooms him to survive every danger and eventually become a monk himself. He is incapable of love for a woman, or for his unbaptized children; he flogs a cat and rides wild horses to their death. Yet he shows self-sacrificial heroism when he protects a Gypsy girl from his employer or when he fights Caucasian tribesmen. But the tone of “The Enchanted Wanderer” is as variable as its geographical range. One episode was too much for the censor: a Russian woman abducted by the Nogai Tatars converts to Islam and reinterprets their faith—they believed that a husband may not approach his wife unless she first cuts all his nails. Ksana-Khanum tells her husband that the rule does not state “all your nails,” that two will do, and the tribe’s conjugal life is reinvigorated. Both Tsarist and Soviet censors suppressed this passage. (It reappeared only in this century, and this translation reintegrates it into the text for the first time.)

Critics failed to see that Leskov’s sequence of peregrinations, adventures, and perils was by no means casual. The initial topic of suicide reemerges when the desperate Gypsy girl tries to end her life, followed by the suicidal heroism of the wanderer himself. Similarly, uncontrollable passions, whether for gambling, alcohol, or horses, make a ground base for the contrasting episodes. Throughout the work, Leskov’s impressive expertise, whether on horse training or on Tatar customs, leaves the reader convinced of the work’s ethnological plausibility.

“The Enchanted Wanderer” ends by prophesying war: it chimes with the anticipation in the mid-1870s of a new world war between Russia on the one hand and the Islamic and Western worlds on the other. Such premonitions haunt the last part of *Anna Karenina* and the essays of the philosopher Konstantin Leontiev. For readers of the time, not foreseeing that Bismarck and Disraeli would avert conflict, the story’s prophesies made a grim climax.

In the mid-1870s Leskov won the guarded approval of Lev Tolstoy. Leskov sought out Tolstoy and was in frequent and intimate correspondence with him and his daughters. He found common ground in Tolstoy's Protestant and anti-ecclesiastic leanings, and followed him by adopting vegetarianism and an idiosyncratic costume (in Leskov's case, a workman's cap and a housecoat made from secondhand cassocks). Tolstoy conceded that Leskov was a genius, closer to the Russian people than he, but insisted that he would be a better writer if he were less talented: the James Joyce–like inventiveness of Leskov's dialogues was too much for Tolstoy.

Despite family purgatory, Leskov became even more productive. By 1875 his partner Ekaterina Bubnova had gone, leaving her eldest son, Nikolai, and Andrei, her young son by Leskov, in his care. Leskov got on badly with his daughter Vera, who would soon marry, as would Andrei (both disastrously and against his wishes), but he cherished his younger daughter, Varia. Varia, Leskov told Tolstoy, was an angelic orphan who slept in his bed (and occasionally wet it), but read to him every evening. Varia led a wretched life: her correspondence with her mother, whom she hardly knew, was dictated by Leskov; she was welcome neither in the "master's quarters, nor in the servants'," where Leskov's two maids treated her contemptuously. In 1875 Leskov moved out of his apartment on Tavricheskaia Street and began a sequence of shorter tenancies in more squalid premises, spending his last years in a building belonging to the Society of Nurses. He began to frequent Petersburg's flea markets, collecting and hoarding junk, as well as some remarkable examples of folk craft; in the same way, he acquired a remarkable historical and religious library. His apartments became so full that he affixed a notice to the door forbidding uninvited visitors.

The most famous of Leskov's short stories, "The Steel Flea," is about a Russian blacksmith determined (like the Old Believers in "The Sealed Angel") to improve on the work of some English blacksmiths who had presented the Tsar with a tiny dancing steel flea. The Russian, Lefty, contrives to shoe this flea, using nails so small as to be invisible to the naked eye; the extra weight, however, is enough to prevent the flea from being able to dance. The story's brilliant language, dense with malapropisms and wordplay, provides an entertaining and illuminating commentary on Anglo-Russian cultural differences and misunderstandings. But the story attracted criticism: Lefty's inventive spoonerisms were seen as an attack on Russian language norms; Leskov was accused of disparaging great Russian leaders. His explanation that he had heard the original story in a factory led critics to accuse him of merely recording an urban myth. Eventually he was forced to remove the story from his *Complete Works*, but it nevertheless became widely read.

In the 1880s Leskov acquired for some sixty rubles "fifty-seven legal records of scandals of the 1830s and 1840s." He used these documents to write a series of stories, including "The Unmercenary Engineers," about unjustly persecuted "righteous men," as well as about "rumor-mongers and fantasists, Apocrypha, inventions and jokes from a time of silence." Unexpectedly for a man who distrusted the medical profession, these "righteous men" included a doctor, Ilarion Dubrovo, who died after sucking the diphtherial membranes from the throat of a little girl. (Leskov's Varia had just been saved in the hospital from diphtheria.) The "righteous man" who impressed Leskov most was Nikolai Fermor, a military engineer who refused to accept bribes, was ostracized by his fellow officers, warned off by the city bishop, and diagnosed as mad: Tsar Nicholas I himself (who told his son that he and Fermor were the last two honest men in Russia) provided Fermor with his personal psychiatrist, whose complacency had fatal consequences for the engineer.

"The Unmercenary Engineers" began a chain reaction. Anton Chekhov's "Ward No. 6" of 1892 deals with a similarly pathologically honest patient who believes in truth and justice, and is treated by a cynical psychiatrist. The difference is that Chekhov's patient survives, and Chekhov's doctor, imprisoned in his own hospital, dies. Leskov exclaimed, " 'Ward No. 6' is Russia!" In 1894, just before his last illness, Leskov wrote an extraordinary novel, *Hare Park*, in which a choirboy ends up as a secret policeman who goes insane as he hunts down revolutionaries: the secret policeman dies in a psychiatric hospital, nursed by one of those whom he used to persecute. (This novel was so controversial for the censors, in equating the church with the secret police and the revolutionaries with the saints, and so saturated with linguistic tricks and arcane references, that it could not be published until after the revolution, and even then, its complex narrative, mixing the Ukrainian of the secret policeman's childhood with the Church Slavonic of his period in the church, has reserved it for Leskov adepts.)

Late in life, Leskov became fascinated with the *Prologue*, a seventeenth-century collection of Byzantine moral tales translated from the Greek. He commented that "The *Prologue* is a rubbish heap, but in the rubbish there are pictures that you couldn't possibly invent." Leskov chose to retell the legend of Prudentius because it was least likely to provoke the clergy. The original legend was simple—a rich merchant falls in love with a widow, who consents to marry him only after an ordeal she devises: he

must be locked up for four days without food, and then offered the choice between a banquet and a marriage bed. The merchant fails the test by choosing the banquet; the parties separate to become monk and nun. Leskov, to his critics' dismay, revised the story to show that the monastic life was fit only for a few, and that ordinary human beings needed physical love and marriage.

Leskov's last years were increasingly eccentric. On the one hand, he wrote works of unpalatable genius, such as *Hare Park*. On the other, he alienated friends and family: he openly refused to be listed as a member of the Society of Friends of Children, wondering why people felt compelled "to care for their children, even though they will turn out to be scoundrels not worth caring for." He treated other writers roughly: he poured salad oil over Chekhov's head, telling him "I anoint you as Samuel anointed David." The only literary figure, apart from Suvorin, whom he associated with was Tolstoy's unpopular acolyte Vladimir Chertkov. Leskov made out his will recognizing Varia as equal to his legitimate children, then demanded that the charitable Literary Fund pay for her education as a homeless orphan. He refused to accept any doctor's diagnosis; his will requested not only the cheapest possible funeral but an autopsy. When he died in February 1895, only his son Andrei was in the house. None of his other children, let alone their mothers, followed the coffin: the body was not embalmed, as was the tradition. Vera Noga squandered her inheritance, as she and her oaf of a husband had squandered his, and lived hand to mouth for the next thirty years from whatever she could squeeze from publishers.

Leskov was not acclaimed posthumously, as Russia's other major writers were, with biographies and critical monographs. But cheap editions of his collected works sold well in the 1900s. After the revolution, he was virtually banned as a "reactionary," although a generation of new Soviet writers were influenced by his techniques and source material. Apart from single volumes in 1927 and 1946, it was not until Stalin's death that Leskov resurfaced.

In 1956 an eleven-volume edition appeared (the biography of Leskov by his son Andrei had also been published). I was then a student: an émigré told me that Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy did not provide an entry into the core of Russian culture, and I needed Leskov. As a passenger on an Intourist camping tour bus, I stopped in Minsk. The bookshop had the eleven-volume Leskov only as a complete set for subscribers, but an assistant broke the rules and sold me just volume four—which contained *The Cathedral and Its Clergy*, "The Sealed Angel," and "The Enchanted Wanderer." My Russian was then inadequate, but I struggled through the volume and was bewitched. Over the years I reread the whole collection (once while bedridden with Weil's disease) and then visited Leskov's house in Oriol. Only recently a thirty-volume edition of all Leskov's fiction and journalism began to be published (it may take another twenty years to complete). In Russia, at least, he has finally joined the pantheon. Western scholars, notably the late William Edgerton, Hugh McLean, and James Muckle, have contributed much. But translators still have first to understand his texts fully and, second, to devise ways to realize his genius in their own languages. I hope that this selection proves how much progress has been made.

—DONALD RAYFIELD
December 2019

LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK

A Sketch

It's only the first song that makes you blush.

—Russian saying

1

NOW AND again in these parts you come across people so remarkable that, no matter how much time has passed since you met them, it is impossible to recall them without your heart trembling. One such person was Katerina Lvovna Izmailova, a merchant's wife who was once the center of a drama so terrible that our local gentry, taking their cue from someone's lighthearted quip, took to calling her Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.

Katerina Lvovna was not exactly a beauty, but there was something pleasing about her nevertheless. She was only in her twenty-fourth year; she was short but shapely, with a neck that could have been sculpted from marble; she had graceful shoulders and a firm bosom; her nose was straight and fine, her eyes black and lively, and she had a high white forehead and black, almost blue-black hair. Herself from the province of Kursk, from somewhere on the banks of the Tuskar River, she had been given in marriage to a local merchant by the name of Izmailov; she did not, however, love him or feel any attraction toward him—it was simply that he had asked for her hand and she, being poor, could not afford to be choosy. The Izmailov family was of no small importance in our town: they traded in white flour, rented a large mill in the district, and owned profitable orchards on the outskirts of town as well as a fine town house. In short, they were well-to-do. Moreover, they were not a large family: there was only the father-in-law, Boris Timofeyevich Izmailov, a man of nearly eighty who had long been a widower; Katerina Lvovna's husband, Zinovy Borisovich, who was a little over fifty; and Katerina Lvovna herself. That was all. Although Katerina Lvovna and Zinovy Borisovich had been married for more than four years, they still had no children. Nor did Zinovy Borisovich have any children by his first wife, with whom he had lived for twenty years before being widowed. When he married Katerina Lvovna, he had hoped that God, at least through this second marriage, would grant him a son to inherit his wealth and continue the family name, but he had been no more fortunate with Katerina Lvovna than with his first wife.

This childlessness was a cause of much grief to Zinovy Borisovich, and not only to Zinovy Borisovich but also to old Boris Timofeyevich, and it was even a great sadness to Katerina Lvovna herself. First, there was the boredom of life in a barred and bolted merchant's house with a high fence and unchained watchdogs running about the yard, an unrelieved boredom that more than once reduced the young woman to a state of depression bordering on stupor; how glad she would have been, God knows how glad, to have a little child to fuss over! And second, there were the never-ending reproaches: "Why did you have to foist yourself on a man? A barren woman should remain a spinster!"—as though she really were guilty of some crime against her husband, her father-in-law, and the whole of their honorable merchant family.

For all its ease and affluence, Katerina Lvovna's life in her father-in-law's house was a deeply tedious life. She seldom visited anyone—and even if she did go out with her husband to call on his fellow merchants, this brought her little joy. They were all so severe: they would watch how she sat down, how she walked, how she stood. Katerina Lvovna, however, was fiery and exuberant by nature, and having grown up in poverty, had been accustomed to simplicity and freedom: running down to the river with her buckets and bathing in her shift by the pier, or throwing sunflower-seed husks over the gate and onto the head of some handsome young fellow who happened to be passing just then. Now things were different. Her husband and father-in-law would rise at the crack of dawn, have tea at six in the morning—then off they would go to attend to their business, leaving her to wander from room to room. Everywhere was clean, everywhere was quiet and empty, lamps glimmered before the icons, but nowhere in the house was there a living sound or a human voice.

Katerina Lvovna would walk about the empty rooms, start to yawn from boredom, and climb the stairs to the conjugal bedroom, which was in a high-ceilinged attic. There she would sit for a while, gazing out at the barns, where hemp was being weighed or flour was being poured into sacks; she would start yawning again and be glad to doze off for an hour or two—but she would wake to that same Russian boredom, the boredom of a merchant house, a boredom so profound that, as people say, it makes even the thought of hanging yourself seem like fun. And Katerina Lvovna had no love of reading; in any case,

apart from the Kiev *Lives of the Holy Fathers*, there were no books in the house.

Yes, it was a boring life that Katerina Lvovna had been living in her father-in-law's prosperous house for five long years with a husband who showed her little affection, but, as often happens, no one was in the least concerned about this boredom of hers.

2

One spring, during the sixth year of Katerina Lvovna's marriage, the dam at the Izmailovs' water mill burst. As ill chance would have it, this happened when there was a great deal of work on at the mill, and the breach was a major one: the water dropped as low as the lowest beam, and no one seemed able to do anything about it. Zinovy Borisovich rounded up workers from the entire district and didn't absent himself from the mill for a single moment; his father looked after their affairs in the town, while Katerina Lvovna languished at home day after day on her own. At first she was more bored than ever, but then she began to like it: she felt freer. She had never been especially fond of Zinovy Borisovich and, with him out of the way, there was at any rate one less person telling her what to do.

One day Katerina Lvovna was sitting by the window up in her attic, yawning and yawning and thinking of nothing in particular until, in the end, she began to feel ashamed of doing so much yawning. After all, it was a lovely day—warm, bright, and cheerful—and through the green wooden trellis, she could see all the different birds fluttering from bough to bough in the fruit trees.

"What am I doing sitting here and yawning my head off?" Katerina Lvovna said to herself. "Why don't I just go for a little walk in the yard? Or I could go into the orchard."

Katerina Lvovna threw on an old damask jacket and went out into the yard.

It was sunny outside and she wanted to breathe in great lungfuls of air; and she could hear gales of laughter coming from the gallery outside the barn.

"What's making you all so happy?" Katerina Lvovna asked her father-in-law's stewards.

"We've been weighing a live sow, Katerina Lvovna," one of them replied.

"What sow?"

"A sow called Aksinya, ma'am, one as gave birth to a son called Vasily and forgot to invite us along to the christening," said a young man with a bold, cheerful voice. His insolent, handsome face was framed by dark stubble and curls as black as pitch.

Just then, out of the pan hanging from the crossbeam of the weighing scales, there appeared the plump rosy face of Aksinya the cook.

"You devils, you slippery devils!" she cursed, trying to seize hold of the iron beam and climb out of the swaying pan.

"She weighs twenty stone before dinner and if she eats another basket of hay there won't be weights enough to weigh her with," said the handsome young man. Turning the pan over, he tipped the cook out onto a pile of sacks in the corner.

Cursing merrily, the woman began to tidy herself up.

"All right—and how much do *I* weigh?" said Katerina Lvovna. Grabbing hold of the ropes, she jumped up onto the pan.

"Nine and a half stone," said handsome young Sergey, after throwing some weights into the other pan. "A marvel!"

"What's to marvel at?"

"That you weigh even nine and a half stone, Katerina Lvovna. The way I see it, a woman like you should be carried about in a man's arms the whole livelong day. You'd never tire a man out—no, he'd feel nothing but sheer delight."

"Think I'm made of air, do you? I say I'd tire you all right," replied Katerina Lvovna. No longer being accustomed to this kind of talk, she blushed a little; at the same time she felt a sudden longing to let her hair down, to swap saucy jokes and have a good laugh.

"You wouldn't, by God! I could carry you all the way to Arabia the Blessed," said Sergey.

"You've got it wrong, young man," said a peasant who'd been sacking up flour. "What's weight got to do with it? Who cares what a body weighs? What we weigh, young man, means nothing. It's our strength, it's the strength in us, it's our strength that counts."

"I was ever so strong as a girl," said Katerina Lvovna, again unable to hold herself back. "Stronger than a good many men."

"Give us your hand then," said the handsome young man, "and we'll see if you're telling the truth."

Katerina Lvovna felt embarrassed, but she held out her hand.

“Ouch! Let go my ring—you’re hurting me!” cried Katerina Lvovna, as Sergey gripped her hand. With her free hand, she gave him a shove in the chest.

The young man let go of his mistress and, from the force of her push, staggered back nearly two yards.

“Some woman!” said an astonished peasant.

“Let me try a wrestling hold,” said Sergey.

“All right then,” said Katerina Lvovna. In high spirits now, she raised her elbows.

Sergey embraced the young mistress and pressed her firm bosom against his red shirt. All Katerina Lvovna could do was wriggle her shoulders. Sergey lifted her off the ground, held her in his arms, squeezed her, and put her gently down on the upturned weighing pan.

Katerina Lvovna had been unable to show off any of her vaunted strength. Red and flushed, she sat on the pan, straightened her jacket, which had slipped off her shoulders, and quietly left the barn, while Sergey gave a vigorous cough and shouted out, “Right, you numbskulls and blockheads! Fill up the sacks—and no slacking! And if there’s flour left over, you’ll be living in clover!”

It was as if what had happened had made not the least impression on him.

“That Sergey’s a devil for the lasses!” said Aksinya the cook, as she plodded along behind Katerina Lvovna. “The bastard’s tall and handsome, he does as he pleases. Any woman he fancies he sweet-talks and flatters until she gives in. And he’s fickle, as fickle as they come!”

“By the way, Aksinya, er . . .” said the young mistress, still walking in front of Aksinya. “That baby boy of yours—is he still alive?”

“Of course, ma’am, and why wouldn’t he be? It’s them as aren’t wanted as prove the sturdiest.”

“And where did he come from?”

“How would I know? Live in a crowd—you walk about with many.”

“And has that young fellow been here for long?”

“Who? You mean Sergey?”

“Yes.”

“It’ll be about a month now, ma’am. He used to work for the Kopchonovs, but the master threw him out.” Aksinya lowered her voice and added, “I’ve heard there was love between him and the mistress. A thousand curses on his soul—but he’s a bold one all right.”

3

A warm milky twilight hung over the town. Zinovy Borisovich still had not returned from the dam. Nor was Katerina Lvovna’s father-in-law at home; he had gone to the name day celebration of an old friend, saying he wouldn’t be back until after dinner. Having nothing better to do, Katerina Lvovna dined early, went up to her attic, and opened the window; leaning against the frame, she began shelling sunflower seeds. The servants ate in the kitchen, then went off to find somewhere to sleep—by the sheds, in the barns, or in tall fragrant haylofts. The last to go out was Sergey. He strolled about the yard, let the dogs off their chains, whistled a bit, and, passing beneath Katerina Lvovna’s window, looked up at her and gave a deep bow.

“Greetings,” Katerina Lvovna said softly from her attic, and the yard was as silent as a desert.

“Ma’am!” came a voice, two minutes later, from outside Katerina Lvovna’s locked door.

“Who’s there?” Katerina Lvovna asked fearfully.

“Please don’t be frightened. It’s me, Sergey.”

“What is it, Sergey, what do you want?”

“Just a quick word with you, Katerina Lvovna. There’s a small favor I’d like to ask of you, it’s nothing important. May I come in for a moment?”

Katerina Lvovna turned the key and let Sergey in.

“What is it?” she asked, returning to the window.

“I wanted to ask, Katerina Lvovna, if you happen to have a book I could borrow. I’m bored.”

“I don’t have any books, Sergey. I’m not one for reading.”

“I’m so bored,” Sergey repeated.

“But why?”

“Heavens above—how could I not be bored? I’m young—and life here is like life in a monastery. I look ahead and see nothing but a life of loneliness till my dying day. There are times I despair.”

“Why don’t you marry?”

“That’s easier said than done. Who could I marry? I’m a nobody—what girl from a well-to-do family would marry someone like me? And as for the poorer girls—well, Katerina Lvovna, as you know yourself,

they're lacking in culture. What understanding of love can they ever have? There's little enough of that, as you know only too well, even among the wealthier folk. Take your own self, if you don't mind my saying so—to any man who has feelings you'd bring nothing but joy, but here you are, cooped up in a cage like a canary."

"Yes, I'm bored," Katerina Lvovna couldn't help but say.

"How could you not be bored, ma'am, living the life you lead? Even if you did, as it were, have an admirer, the way most women do, when would you ever get a chance to see him?"

"No, you . . . you shouldn't say things like that. If I could only have a little baby, then I think I'd be happy."

"But ma'am, if you don't mind my saying so, a baby doesn't just come out of nowhere. I've lived long enough, you know, among merchants—do you think I haven't seen what life's like for their wives? You know the song: 'If you have no sweetheart, *toskà* fills your heart'—and this melancholy, let me tell you, Katerina Lvovna, lies so heavy on this heart of mine that I'd gladly take out my steel knife and cut out my poor heart and throw it down by your little feet. Yes, I'd feel better that way, a hundred times better . . ." Sergey's voice had begun to tremble.

"What are you telling me all this about your heart for? What's it got to do with me? Go away."

"No, ma'am, please," said Sergey, quivering all over as he took a step toward Katerina Lvovna. "I know it, I can see it, I can even feel and understand very well that your lot in this life is no easier than mine. Only now," he went on without drawing breath, "now, at this very moment, everything lies in your hands, everything lies in your power."

"What do you . . . Why did you come here? I'll throw myself out of the window," cried Katerina Lvovna. Overwhelmed by ineffable terror, she clutched with one hand at the windowsill.

"My matchless sweetheart, why would you want to do that?" Sergey whispered nonchalantly, and, pulling his young mistress away from the window, he held her tight.

"Oh, oh, let go of me," Katerina Lvovna moaned softly, weakening under Sergey's passionate kisses and, in spite of herself, pressing closer still to his powerful body.

Sergey lifted his mistress into the air like a child and carried her into a dark corner.

Silence set in, broken only by regular ticking from a pocket watch hanging above the bed, which belonged to Katerina Lvovna's husband, but that changed nothing.

"Go now," said Katerina Lvovna half an hour later. Not looking at Sergey, she was rearranging her disheveled hair in front of a small mirror.

"Why would I want to do that?" Sergey answered happily.

"My father-in-law will lock the doors."

"Oh, my sweetheart, what kind of men have you known that they can't find their way to a woman except through a door? For me, whether I'm coming or going, there are doors wherever I look," replied the young man, pointing to the wooden posts supporting the gallery.

4

Another week went by without Zinovy Borisovich coming home, and his wife and Sergey spent every night together, until break of day.

Much wine from the old man's cellar was drunk during these nights in Zinovy Borisovich's bedroom; many sweetmeats were eaten, many kisses were planted on sugary lips, and much was the fondling of black curls on soft pillows. But no road runs smoothly forever; all have their potholes and ruts.

One night Boris Timofeyevich was unable to sleep; he was wandering about the silent house in his calico nightshirt, going first to one window, then to another, when all of a sudden what should he see—sliding down the post beneath his daughter-in-law's window—but the red shirt of young Sergey! Astounded, he leaped out and seized the young man by the legs. Sergey swung his arm back, meaning to land a hearty blow on his master's ear, but then he stopped, realizing this would mean trouble.

"What on earth . . ." said Boris Timofeyevich. "What the hell have you been doing?"

"What I've been doing, Boris Timofeyevich, what I've been doing, good sir, is what I'm doing no longer."

"Have you just been with my daughter-in-law?"

"I know very well, master, where I've just been, and I advise you, Boris Timofeyevich, to listen to me and mark my words: what's done can't be undone, and it's best not to bring shame on one's own house. What do you want of me? What satisfaction do you require?"

"I want, you viper, to give you five hundred strokes of the lash," said Boris Timofeyevich.

“I’m the culprit, you’re the judge. Tell me where I’m to go—and do as you wish. Drink the blood from my veins.”

Boris Timofeyevich led Sergey down to his stone storeroom and lashed him with a whip until the strength gave out in his arm. Sergey didn’t even let out a groan, though he chewed through half of his shirtsleeve.

Boris Timofeyevich left Sergey in the storeroom, intending him to stay there until his flayed back, soon to be covered by an iron-hard black crust, had healed. He left him an earthenware water jug, locked the door with a big padlock, and sent for his son.

But a seventy-mile journey on Russian country roads takes a good while even today, and Katerina Lvovna soon felt she couldn’t live another hour without her Sergey. Released into the full breadth of her expansive nature, all restraint swept away, she grew so determined there was no stopping her. She found out where Sergey was locked up, spoke to him through the iron door, and rushed off to look for the keys. “Let him out,” she said to her father-in-law.

The old man turned purple. Never had he expected such impudence from a daughter-in-law who, however she had sinned, had at least always done what he told her.

“You . . . How dare you!” And he began cursing Katerina Lvovna for all he was worth.

“Let him out,” she said. “I swear to you in all conscience that he and I have done nothing wrong.”

“Nothing wrong!” he said, through gritted teeth. “And what was it you and Sergey got up to at nights? Plumping up your husband’s pillows?”

But she just kept on and on: he must, he must let Sergey go.

“Very well then,” Boris Timofeyevich finally pronounced. “If that’s what you want, O honest wife, then that’s what you’ll get. As soon as your husband’s come back, we’ll take you to the stables and flog you with our own hands. And I’ll have that Sergey packed off to jail tomorrow.”

So Boris Timofeyevich decided; his decision, however, was never to be put into effect.

5

Before going to bed, Boris Timofeyevich had some buckwheat kasha with mushrooms, and soon afterward he began to suffer from heartburn. All of a sudden he was having spasms in the pit of his stomach; he vomited terribly, and toward morning he died, dying exactly the same death as the rats in his barns, for whom Katerina Lvovna used with her very own hands to prepare a special dish containing a toxic white powder that had been entrusted to her for safekeeping.

Katerina Lvovna let her Sergey out of the stone storeroom and, not caring two jots what others might think, laid him in her husband’s bed to recover from his flogging. Her father-in-law, Boris Timofeyevich, was given a Christian burial, and no one suspected a thing. What, after all, was there to wonder at? Boris Timofeyevich had died, and what of it? He had died from eating mushrooms—like many others before him. Boris Timofeyevich was buried in a hurry. They didn’t even wait for Zinovy Borisovich to come back: it was warm just then, and the messenger sent to the mill had been unable to find him there. Zinovy Borisovich had happened to hear of some timber, another seventy miles away, that was being sold off cheap; he’d gone to inspect it and hadn’t told anyone where he was going.

After the funeral, Katerina Lvovna denied herself nothing. She’d never been timid, but what got into her now was beyond belief: she strutted about, ordered people around, and never let Sergey leave her side. Everyone was full of wonderment, but Katerina Lvovna was openhanded and generous—and the wonderment ceased. “Sergey and the mistress,” they said, “are enjoying a little romanticness—that’s all. It’s her business, and it’s her that’ll be held to account.”

In the meantime Sergey recovered, stood tall again—and once more he was Katerina Lvovna’s handsome young falcon. Once more life grew sweet. But not for them alone was time passing; after a long absence, Zinovy Borisovich, the wronged husband, was hurrying home.

6

The afternoon was scorching hot, and the flies were quick and lively and a terrible nuisance. Katerina Lvovna closed the bedroom shutters, hung a woolen shawl over them, and lay down beside Sergey on the merchant’s high bed. There she both slept and didn’t sleep; the heat was unbearable, her face streamed with sweat, and her breathing was hot and labored. She felt it must be time to wake up, time to go and

have tea in the garden, but she had to struggle to rouse herself. In the end, the cook came and knocked at the door. “The samovar under the apple tree’s going cold,” she said. Katerina Lvovna managed to wake up and found herself stroking a cat. The cat was pushing itself between her and Sergey, a splendid gray tomcat, as big as they come . . . and with whiskers like a rural tax collector. Katerina Lvovna ran her fingers through his fluffy fur and he pressed up against her, pushed his blunt little face into her springy breasts, and all the time went on singing his quiet little song, as if he were telling a tale of love. “How did this giant of a cat get in here?” wondered Katerina Lvovna. “And the cream’s still on the windowsill. The rascal’s going to gobble it all up—I must chase him out.” She tried to seize hold of the cat and throw him out, but he slipped through her fingers like a breath of mist. “Where on earth’s this cat come from?” Katerina Lvovna asked herself in her nightmare. “No cat’s ever got in here before—and just look at the size of this one!” She tried to seize hold of the cat again—and once again the cat wasn’t there. “What’s happening? Once and for all, is this a cat or isn’t it?” thought Katerina Lvovna. Panic gripped her, jolting her awake and driving her nightmare away. Katerina Lvovna looked around her bedroom—there was no cat at all, only her handsome Sergey, his powerful arm pressing her breasts to his hot face.

Katerina Lvovna sat up in bed, kissed Sergey and kissed him again, caressed and fondled him, smoothed the rumpled bedclothes, and went out into the orchard to have tea; the sun had set, and a magical evening was dropping down over the baked earth.

“I overslept,” Katerina Lvovna said to Aksinya the cook, as she sat down to drink her tea on a carpet spread beneath a flowering apple tree. “What do you think it all means, Aksinya?” she asked, wiping her saucer with the tea towel.

“What does what mean, ma’am?”

“I wasn’t asleep, I’m sure I was wide awake, and a cat got in and started rubbing itself against me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s true. A cat got in.”

And Katerina Lvovna told Aksinya all about this cat that had somehow gotten into the bedroom.

“And why were you stroking it?”

“What do you mean, ‘why were you stroking it’? How would I know?”

“Well, it’s all a riddle to me,” said the cook.

“And to me too.”

“It must mean that someone’s heart has grown warm toward you, or something like that.”

“But what exactly?”

“No one, my friend, can tell you that—only that there’s sure to be something.”

“I was dreaming about the moon—and then there was this cat,” Katerina Lvovna went on.

“The moon means a little one.”

Katerina Lvovna blushed.

“Wouldn’t you like me to send for Sergey?” asked Aksinya, evidently hoping to be taken into Katerina Lvovna’s confidence.

“All right then,” said Katerina Lvovna. “Go and fetch him. He can have tea here with me.”

“All right, ma’am. I’ll send him out to you,” said Aksinya, and waddled off toward the garden gate.

Katerina Lvovna told Sergey about the cat.

“But it’s only a dream,” said Sergey.

“But why, Seryozha, have I never had a dream like that before?”

“There’s many a thing that’s never happened before. There was a time when I could do nothing but gaze after you and pine—but now I’m master of the whole of your white body!”

Sergey took Katerina Lvovna in his arms, whirled her around in the air, and playfully threw her down on the soft carpet.

“Oh, you make my head spin,” said Katerina Lvovna. “Sergey, come and sit with me for a moment,” she added, stretching herself out voluptuously.

Her young man bent down, came in under the low apple tree, which was awash with white blossoms, and sat on the carpet at Katerina Lvovna’s feet.

“So you were pining for me, were you, Seryozha?”

“How could I help pining?”

“How did you pine for me? Tell me what it was like.”

“How can I? How can I say what it is to pine? I longed for you.”

“But why didn’t I sense you were longing for me? They say women sense things like that.”

Sergey said nothing.

“And why were you always singing,” Katerina went on, still caressing him, “if you were so unhappy without me? Well? It was you I used to hear singing outside the barn, wasn’t it?”

“So what if I was singing? A mosquito sings all through its life, but that doesn’t mean it’s happy,” Sergey replied dryly.

There was a pause. These confessions of Sergey’s were music to Katerina Lvovna’s ears.

She wanted to keep on talking, but Sergey frowned and said nothing.

“Look, Sergey—isn’t this paradise? Simply paradise!” Katerina Lvovna exclaimed, looking up through branches thick with apple blossoms at a clear pale blue sky and a lovely full moon.

The light of the moon, filtering through the leaves and flowers of the apple tree, was playing over Katerina Lvovna’s supine form, casting the most fantastical bright spots over her face and the whole of her body; the air was still; only the lightest of warm breezes ruffled the sleepy leaves, diffusing a delicate scent of flowering grasses and trees, instilling languor and indolence and conjuring up dark desires.

Getting no answer, Katerina Lvovna fell silent again and went on looking up at the sky through the pale pink apple blossoms. Sergey was silent too; the sky, however, was of no interest to him. With his arms flung around his knees, he was staring down at his boots.

The night was golden. Silence, light, delicate perfumes, and a benign, enlivening warmth. Beyond the ravine at the end of the orchard, someone began singing in a resonant voice; in the dense thicket of bird cherry by the fence, a nightingale trilled and burst into loud song; in a cage on a tall pole, a quail gave voice to its drowsy delirium; a sleek horse let out a lazy sigh from the other side of the stable wall; and a boisterous pack of dogs tore soundlessly across the pastureland beyond the fence, vanishing into the shapeless black shadow of the derelict salt warehouses.

Katerina Lvovna raised herself on one elbow and looked at the tall orchard grass; the grass seemed to be playing with the light of the moon as it was filtered through the leaves and flowers of the apple trees. Capricious spots of light were turning the grass to gold, quivering and flickering over it like living butterflies of fire; or perhaps the grass under the trees had been caught in a net dropped by the moon and was being tossed from side to side.

“Oh, Seryozha, my darling, how lovely it all is!” said Katerina Lvovna as she gazed around her.

Sergey looked around with indifference.

“What’s the matter, Sergey? Why so gloomy? Are you tired of my love already?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Sergey. Bending over her, he gave Katerina Lvovna a casual kiss.

“You’re a deceiver, Seryozha,” said Katerina Lvovna. “You’re not to be trusted.”

“You must be talking about some other man,” Sergey replied calmly.

“Then why did you kiss me like that?”

Sergey said nothing.

“It’s husbands and wives who kiss like that,” Katerina Lvovna went on, playing with his curls, “and they do it to brush the dust off each other’s lips. When you kiss me, I want you to kiss me so it makes the new blossom fall to the ground from this tree. Yes, like this,” she whispered, twining herself around her lover and kissing him passionately.

“Listen, Seryozha, there’s something I want to ask you,” Katerina Lvovna began again a little later. “Why does everyone say the same thing? Why do they all say you’re a deceiver?”

“Who’s been telling lies about me?”

“It’s what people say.”

“Maybe the women I deceived were of no worth.”

“What were you doing with them then? Why were you loving worthless women?”

“What do you know about it? You think we decide these things in advance? It’s temptation that does the work. You don’t mean anything serious but you break the Lord’s commandment and then there’s no getting away from a woman. There’s love for you!”

“Listen to me, Seryozha! I know nothing about these other women, and I don’t want to know anything about them. But you know very well how you turned my head and how you enticed me into this love of ours, and you know it was through your cunning as much as through my desire, and so if you ever deceive me, Seryozha, if you ever leave me for anyone else, then forgive me, my dear sweetheart, but I shan’t be parted from you alive.”

Sergey gave a start. “Katerina Lvovna! Light of my eyes!” he began. “Can’t you see how things are between you and me? You say I seem gloomy, but don’t you ask yourself what it is that makes me so gloomy? What if my blood’s all curdled with grief and it’s drowning my heart?”

“Tell me, Sergey, tell me what grieves you!”

“What’s there to tell? Any day now, God willing, your husband will be back home, and then—no more Sergey. He’ll be out in the backyard again, sleeping beside the singers. He’ll be looking up from the barn at a candle burning in Katerina Lvovna’s bedroom as she plumps up the feather bed and lies down to rest with her lawful husband, Zinovy Borisovich.”

“I don’t think there’ll be a lot of that,” said Katerina Lvovna, with a careless wave of the hand.

“Oh, won’t there? The way I see it myself, there most certainly will be. And I have a heart too, Katerina Lvovna. Yes, I can see the suffering that’s in store for me.”

“Come on now. That’s enough.”

Katerina Lvovna was pleased by this manifestation of Sergey’s jealousy; she laughed, then went back to kissing him.

“But let me say once more,” Sergey began again, gently freeing his head from Katerina Lvovna’s arms, which were bare to the shoulders, “let me say once more that this lowly station of mine causes me to think many thoughts, and I think these thoughts not just once, and not just a dozen times. Yes, let me say, Katerina Lvovna, that were I your equal, were I some merchant or landowner, then I would never, no, never in my life be parted from you. But you know very well, you know what my standing is compared to your own. Soon I shall see a man take you by your white hands and lead you into your bedroom and my poor heart will have to endure this and perhaps it will make me despise myself for the rest of my days. Katerina Lvovna! I’m not like those other fellows who don’t care about anything if only they can have their way with a woman. I know what love is, and I can feel it sucking away at my heart like a black snake.”

“Why are you saying all this to me?” said Katerina Lvovna, now feeling sorry for Sergey.

“Katerina Lvovna! How can I not say it to you? How can I not? When your husband may already know everything, when he may already have heard the wildest of stories, when maybe as soon as tomorrow—not just some far-distant day—there’ll be neither sight nor sound of Sergey in these parts, neither hide nor hair of Sergey.”

“No, no, don’t even say such things, Seryozha! It won’t be like that! It’s not possible for me to be without you,” said Katerina Lvovna, trying to soothe him with her caresses. “If there’s going to be trouble, then either he dies or I die, but I’ll never leave you.”

“No, Katerina Lvovna, that’s not the way it’ll be,” said Sergey, sadly shaking his head. “The joy’s gone out of my life because of this love of ours. If I loved a woman who didn’t stand high above me, I’d be a happy man. How can your love for me ever remain constant? Does it bring you honor to be my mistress? I’d like to be your husband in the eyes of the holy and everlasting church. I’d always understand that my place is beneath you, but at least I’d be able to make it plain and public how I have been rewarded for the deep respect I bear toward the woman I love.”

Katerina Lvovna was stupefied by these words of Sergey’s, by this jealousy of his and his desire to marry her—a desire that always pleases a woman, however intimate her relations with a man have already been. Katerina Lvovna was now ready to follow Sergey through hell and high water, to prison or cross. He had so enthralled her that her devotion to him was absolute. She was mad with happiness; her blood was on fire and she could no longer go on listening. She quickly pressed the palm of one hand against his lips, held his head to her breast, and said, “I know very well how to make a merchant of you and live with you as is right and proper. Only please don’t upset me for nothing—there are bridges to cross, but they’re still a long way ahead.”

And it was back to kisses and caresses.

In the silence of night, through his heavy slumber, the old steward in the nearby barn heard whispers and quiet giggles, as if naughty children were plotting how best to make fun of frail, decrepit old age; then came gay, ringing laughter, as if someone were being tickled by water nymphs from the lake. Splashing in and out of the moonlight, rolling about on the soft carpet, Katerina Lvovna was frolicking with her husband’s young steward. Fresh white blossoms from the curly-headed apple tree rained down on them, but in the end this rain ceased. The short summer night was passing; the moon had hidden behind the steep roofs of the high granaries and, turning ever dimmer, it was now looking askance at the earth; then there was a piercing duet from above the kitchen, followed by spitting, hissing, and a great racket as two or perhaps three cats rolled off the roof and onto the pile of timber stacked against the wall.

“Let’s go and sleep now,” Katerina Lvovna said slowly, as if worn out and battered. She got herself up off the carpet and, just as she was, in her shift and white petticoat, walked through the deathly silence of the yard. Walking behind her, Sergey was carrying the carpet and the blouse she had playfully thrown off.

7

Wearing only her shift, Katerina Lvovna had no sooner blown out the candle and lain down on the soft

feather bed than she was fast asleep. After so much pleasure and love she was dead to the world; her arms slept, her legs slept, and yet, through this deep sleep, she once again heard the bedroom door open. With a soft thud like that of an old bast shoe,[1] the same huge tomcat landed beside her on the bed.

"What a confounded terror this cat is!" Katerina Lvovna thought wearily. "I locked the door myself, I turned the key with my own hands, I shut the window—and here he is again. I must throw him out straightaway." Katerina Lvovna tried to get up, but her sleeping arms and legs refused to obey her; meanwhile the cat walked all over her, purring so strangely it was almost like human speech. This gave Katerina Lvovna goose pimples.

"Heavens!" she said. "There's nothing for it—I must sprinkle the bed with holy water tomorrow. This cat that's taken to visiting me is a very queer cat indeed."

But the cat went on purring and whirring, pushing his face against her and saying, "Cat? Most certainly not! What makes you think I'm a cat? You know very well, Katerina Lvovna, that I'm not a tomcat but the honorable merchant Boris Timofeyevich. I'm just in a bad way at the moment because my guts inside me have been torn apart by a dish I was served by my daughter-in-law. That's what's made me shrink in size," he purred on, "and seem like a cat to anyone who doesn't understand who I really am. So, Katerina Lvovna, how are you getting along these days? Observing your vows faithfully, are you? I thought I'd come along from my grave to see how well you and Sergey Filipovich are keeping your husband's bed warm for him. Purr-purr, but I really can't see a thing. There's no need to be afraid of me: you see, those mushrooms made my eyes fall out. Look me in the eyes, my dear, don't be afraid!"

Katerina Lvovna looked—and screamed to high heaven. Once again the cat was lying between her and Sergey, but the head of this cat was the head of Boris Timofeyevich, every bit as big as the head of the late lamented, only instead of eyes there were two fiery circles spinning in opposite directions, spinning and spinning!

Sergey woke up, calmed Katerina Lvovna, and went back to sleep again, but she was now wide awake—which was just as well.

As she lay there with her eyes wide open, she heard what sounded like someone climbing over the gate. The dogs rushed to the gate but then they went quiet, as if it were someone they knew. A minute passed, there was a click from the iron lock, and the front door opened. "Either I'm dreaming or else my Zinovy Borisovich has come back. He's opened the door with his spare key," thought Katerina Lvovna. She gave Sergey a quick shove.

"Listen, Seryozha," she said. She was now leaning on one elbow, listening intently.

Someone was quietly climbing the stairs, moving cautiously, step by step, toward the locked door of the bedroom.

Katerina Lvovna leaped out of bed and opened the window. Sergey at once jumped out onto the gallery and put his legs around the post he had already slid down many a time.

"No, don't, don't! Lie down where you are. Don't go away," Katerina Lvovna whispered. She threw Sergey's boots and clothes out of the window, then slipped back under the bedclothes and began to wait.

Sergey did as she said. Instead of sliding down the post, he lay down on the gallery, under the bast awning.

Meanwhile Katerina Lvovna could hear her husband; he had come up to the door and was listening outside, holding his breath. She could even hear the rapid beating of his jealous heart; what almost got the better of her, however, was not pity but malicious laughter.

"You're wasting your time!" she said to herself with a smile, her breathing as innocent as a baby's.

This went on for about ten minutes; in the end, Zinovy Borisovich got bored of standing by the door and listening to his wife sleeping. He knocked.

Katerina Lvovna waited a moment and then called out sleepily, "Who is it?"

"Your nearest and dearest," replied Zinovy Borisovich.

"Is it you, Zinovy Borisovich?"

"Of course! Can't you tell?"

Katerina Lvovna jumped up again, let her husband into the bedroom, and dived back into the warm bed.

"It turns a bit chilly just before dawn," she said, pulling the blanket up over her.

Zinovy Borisovich looked around the room as he came in, said a prayer, lit a candle, and looked around again.

"How have you been keeping?" he asked his wife.

"I've been all right," said Katerina Lvovna. She sat up and pulled on a loose calico blouse. "Shall I heat up the samovar?" she asked.

"Why bother? Just call Aksinya."

Katerina Lvovna put on some slippers and ran out of the room. She was gone for half an hour. She lit the fire under the samovar and went quietly out onto the gallery for a word with Sergey.

"Here. Sit here!" she whispered.

"How long for?" answered Sergey, also in a whisper.

"Oh, how stupid you are! Sit here till I call you."

And Katerina Lvovna sat him down in the same place as before.

From where he was, Sergey could hear everything that went on in the bedroom. Once again the door banged as Katerina Lvovna went in to her husband. Sergey could hear every word they said.

"Why have you been so long?" Zinovy Borisovich asked his wife.

"I was doing the samovar," she replied calmly.

Then came a pause. Sergey could hear Zinovy Borisovich hanging up his frock coat on the rack. He washed, snorted, and splashed water in every direction. He asked for a towel. Then they started talking again.

"So, how come you had to bury father?" asked Zinovy Borisovich.

"He died. He died, and we buried him."

"How very strange!"

"Who's to say?" said Katerina Lvovna, clattering the cups about.

Zinovy Borisovich paced sadly up and down the room. "And what have you been doing to pass the time?" he asked.

"Our joys are no secret. We don't go out in the evening—neither to balls nor theaters."

"Nor, it seems, are you overjoyed to have your husband back home," said Zinovy Borisovich, looking at her out of the corner of one eye.

"We're not young newlyweds anymore, to be dancing on air whenever we meet. What do you want from me? Here I am at your beck and call, running about the house at your pleasure."

Katerina Lvovna ran off to fetch the samovar, slipped outside again, nudged Sergey, and said, "Mind you don't doze off, Seryozha!"

Sergey had no idea where all this was leading, but from then on he stayed alert and ready.

When Katerina Lvovna came back, she found Zinovy Borisovich kneeling on top of the coverlet; he was hanging his silver watch with its bead chain above the head of the bed.

"Why, Katerina Lvovna, do you make the bed up for two when you're all on your own?" he asked.

"I've been waiting for you," she answered, looking at him calmly.

"For which we humbly thank you. And what's this doing on the bed?"

Sergey's thin woolen belt was lying on the sheet. Zinovy Borisovich picked it up and dangled it in front of his wife's eyes.

Katerina Lvovna didn't hesitate. "I found it in the garden," she said, "and I used it to tie my skirt."

"Yes!" said Zinovy Borisovich with peculiar emphasis. "I've been hearing a few things about you and your skirts."

"What is it you've heard?"

"About what you've been up to while I've been away."

"I haven't been up to anything."

"Well, we'll find out. We'll soon find out everything," said Zinovy Borisovich, pushing his empty teacup toward his wife.

Katerina Lvovna said nothing.

"Yes, Katerina Lvovna. Whatever's been going on here, we'll soon get to the bottom of it," said Zinovy Borisovich after another long pause, raising his eyebrows expressively.

"Your Katerina Lvovna's not so easily frightened. No, she's not easily frightened at all," she replied.

"What! What!" shouted Zinovy Borisovich.

"Never mind," said his wife. "Forget it."

"You watch your tongue! You've got an awful lot to say for yourself all of a sudden."

"And why shouldn't I have a lot to say for myself?"

"You'd do better to look to how you behave."

"And what's wrong with how I behave? Gossips gossip behind my back—and now I have to put up with insults from you! I like that!"

"It's not gossip, it's the truth—about you and your amours."

"What amours?" yelled Katerina Lvovna, now flaring up in earnest.

"I know very well."

"All right then, out with it."

Zinovy Borisovich said nothing. Once again he pushed his empty cup toward his wife.

“Seems there’s not a lot to say,” Katerina Lvovna said with contempt, tossing a teaspoon onto her husband’s saucer. “Go on then, tell me what people are saying. Who is this new lover of mine?”

“There’s no hurry. You’ll find out soon enough.”

“They’ve been making up stories about Sergey, haven’t they?”

“We shall see, Katerina Lvovna, we shall see. No one has taken away my authority over you, and no one is going to take it away. You’re going to tell me everything.”

“Oh, how I hate all this!” cried Katerina Lvovna. White as a sheet, she slipped out of the room.

“Here he is then,” she said a few moments later, leading Sergey into the room by his sleeve. “Go on then. Ask what you like. But you might end up learning more than you bargained for.”

Zinovy Borisovich was by now quite bewildered. He looked at Sergey, who was leaning against the lintel, and he looked at his wife, who was sitting calmly on the edge of the bed with her arms crossed—and he couldn’t for the life of him work out what was going to happen next.

“What the hell . . . You snake!” he finally managed to say, still in his armchair.

“You know everything anyway, so ask all you like,” said Katerina Lvovna insolently. “You thought you could threaten me with a beating,” she went on, with a sideways glance at Sergey, “but you’ll never ever lay a finger on me again. Yes, I decided what I was going to do with you long ago, before your threats—and I’m not about to change my mind now.”

“What’s going on?” Zinovy Borisovich shouted at Sergey. “Get out of here!”

“Well, I never!” said Katerina Lvovna mockingly.

She quickly locked the door and dropped the key into her pocket. Then she went over to the bed and lolled there in her open blouse.

“Come on, dear Seryozha! Come here, my darling! Come to me!” she called out to the steward.

Sergey tossed back his curls and boldly sat down beside the mistress of the house.

“Good God! What . . . what are you doing, you savages?” shouted Zinovy Borisovich, his face going a dark red as he got up from the chair.

“What’s the matter? Yes—look at him, feast your eyes on my bright-eyed falcon! Isn’t he handsome?” Katerina Lvovna burst out laughing and gave Sergey a passionate kiss.

Then she felt a stinging blow on one cheek, and Zinovy Borisovich was rushing toward the open window.

8

“Like that, is it? I’m well and truly grateful. I was waiting for something like that,” Katerina Lvovna cried out. “Only now, my dear friend, I’m the one who’s in charge here.”

In a single movement she pushed Sergey out of the way, jumped at Zinovy Borisovich from behind, and, before he could reach the window, grabbed him by the throat with her slender fingers and threw him to the ground like a sheaf of newly cut hemp.

Crashing down and smashing the back of his head against the floor, Zinovy Borisovich panicked. He had not expected a denouement as swift as this. Never before had his wife raised her hand against him; it was clear now that she would go to any lengths to be rid of him and that he was in terrible danger. Zinovy Borisovich understood all this in the instant of his fall and he did not cry out, knowing that his cries would go unheard and might only hasten his end. He looked around in silence, then let his eyes rest on his wife with an expression of rage, reproach, and suffering; her fingers were still tightly gripping his throat.

Zinovy Borisovich made no attempt to defend himself. His fists were clenched and his arms lay stretched out on the floor, jerking spasmodically. One arm was free, the other pinned by Katerina Lvovna’s knee.

“Hold him,” she whispered coolly to Sergey. Then she turned back to her husband.

Sergey sat on top of his master and pinned down his arms with his knees. But, just as he was about to slip his hands around his master’s throat, beneath the hands of Katerina Lvovna, he let out a frenzied yell. Zinovy Borisovich had made a desperate effort; at the sight of his tormentor, his last strength galvanized by a wish for bloody revenge, he had freed his arms and seized hold of Sergey’s black curls; like an animal, he sank his teeth into Sergey’s throat. After a moment, however, Zinovy Borisovich let out a heavy groan and his head fell back.

Pale and scarcely breathing at all, Katerina Lvovna was standing over her husband and her lover. In her hand was a heavy cast-iron candlestick; she was holding it by the top end, the heavy base pointing downward. A thin stream of blood was flowing across Zinovy Borisovich’s temple and cheek.

“A priest . . .” Zinovy Borisovich groaned dully. In horror he recoiled as far as he could from Sergey, who was still sitting on him. “I want to confess,” he said still less clearly. He trembled as he looked out of the corner of one eye at the warm blood clotting under his hair.

“You’ll do all right as you are,” whispered Katerina Lvovna. “Get on with it,” she said to Sergey. “Get a proper hold of his throat.”

Zinovy Borisovich began to wheeze.

Katerina Lvovna bent over her husband, pressed down with her hands on the hands clutching her husband’s throat, and put her ear to his chest. After five silent minutes, she got up and said, “All right, that’ll do now.”

Sergey stood up too, puffing and panting. Zinovy Borisovich was dead; there was a gash in his temple and his throat had been crushed. Under his head, to the left, lay a small patch of blood. His wound, however, was now matted with hair, and the blood there had congealed.

Sergey carried Zinovy Borisovich to a cellar beneath the stone storeroom where he himself had so recently been confined by the late Boris Timofeyevich. Then he went back to the attic. Katerina Lvovna, her sleeves rolled up and the hem of her skirt tucked in, was scrubbing away with soap and bast at the bloody stain Zinovy Borisovich had left on the floor of his bedroom. The water had not yet gone cold in the samovar from which the master of the house had been warming his soul with poisoned tea, and she was able to wash away the blood completely.

Then she took a brass slop basin and a well-soaped piece of bast.

“Go on, you hold the candle,” she said to Sergey as she walked over to the door. “Lower down, closer to the floor,” she added, and she carefully examined each of the floorboards over which Zinovy Borisovich had been dragged on his journey down to the cellar.

Only in two places on the painted floor could she see spots of blood the size of cherries. Katerina Lvovna scrubbed them with the bast, and they disappeared. “Creeping up on me like a thief, spying on your own wife—this’ll teach you!” she said, standing up again and looking down toward the storeroom.

“That’s it then,” said Sergey, trembling at the sound of his own voice.

When they got back to the bedroom, a first rosy streak of dawn had begun to show in the east, lightly gilding the blossoming apple trees and peeping through the green stakes of the orchard fence into Katerina Lvovna’s room.

Crossing himself and yawning, a sheepskin jacket flung over his shoulders, the old steward was plodding across the yard from the barn to the kitchen.

Katerina Lvovna carefully pulled on the cord that opened the shutters and looked intently at Sergey, as if trying to see into his soul.

“Now you’re a merchant,” she said, putting her white hands on Sergey’s shoulders.

Sergey said nothing.

Sergey’s lips were trembling, and he was shaking all over as if from fever. As for Katerina Lvovna, it was only her lips that were cold. Two days later, there were large calluses on Sergey’s hands—from working with a heavy spade and a crowbar. Zinovy Borisovich, however, was by then so neatly buried away in his vault that, without the help of his widow or her lover, no one could have found him there until Judgment Day.

9

For some time Sergey wore a crimson kerchief around his neck, complaining that he had a swelling in his throat. But before the teeth marks on Sergey’s neck had time to heal, people began to wonder what had happened to Zinovy Borisovich. It was Sergey himself who brought up the subject most often. In the evening he would sit on the bench by the gate and say to the other young men, “I can’t help wondering, boys, why there’s still no sign of our master.”

And the young men all duly expressed their own wonderment.

Then came news from the mill: the master had hired some horses and set off back home long ago. The driver said that Zinovy Borisovich had seemed upset and had dismissed him in a rather strange fashion: about two miles from the town, near the monastery, he had gotten down from the cart, taken his bag, and continued on foot. This strange story puzzled everyone still more.

Zinovy Borisovich had disappeared; that was all they knew.

Searches were carried out, but nothing was found; the merchant seemed to have vanished into thin air. The driver, who had by then been arrested, simply repeated his story: the merchant had got down from the cart near the river, just by the monastery, and had walked away. The mystery remained unsolved; in

the meantime Katerina Lvovna took advantage of being a widow and began to live with Sergey more openly. People made up one story after another, saying that Zinovy Borisovich had been seen in such-and-such a place, then in some other place, but Zinovy Borisovich still didn't come back home and Katerina Lvovna knew better than anyone that he never would.

A month went by, a second month, then a third; Katerina Lvovna realized she was pregnant.

"The estate will be ours, Seryozha. There's going to be an heir," she said. She went and spoke to the town council. She told them about her missing husband, said she was pregnant, and complained that the business was getting into difficulties. She should be allowed to take over her husband's affairs.

A business couldn't just be left to go to rack and ruin, Katerina Lvovna was her husband's lawful wedded wife, there were no debts—so she must be allowed to take over. She took over.

Katerina Lvovna took charge of everything, and Sergey was no longer just plain Sergey but Sergey Filipovich. And then, like a bolt from the blue, came a new misfortune. The mayor received a letter from Livny; the letter stated that Boris Timofeyevich had used not only his own capital to start up his business but also that of his nephew Fyodor Zakharov Lyamin, a minor; matters, therefore, should be looked into and not left exclusively in the hands of Katerina Lvovna. The mayor passed this news on to Katerina Lvovna, and then, just a week later, an old woman arrived from Livny with a small boy.

"I am a first cousin of the late Boris Timofeyevich," she announced, "and this is my nephew Fyodor Lyamin."

Katerina Lvovna invited them in.

Sergey, who had witnessed all this, turned white as a sheet.

"What's the matter?" asked Katerina Lvovna, noticing Sergey's deathly pallor as he followed the visitors into the house and stood in the vestibule, looking them up and down.

"Nothing," said Sergey, turning back toward the entrance room. "Only that men from Livny can't keep from thievin'!" He sighed, went out, and closed the door behind him.

"What are we going to do now?" Sergey Filipovich asked that evening, as he sat by the samovar with Katerina Lvovna. "All our plans, Katerina Lvovna, have turned to ashes."

"Why do you say that, Sergey?"

"Because everything's going to be divided up. We'll be left with such a paltry little business it won't be worth bothering with."

"Won't our share be enough for you, Sergey?"

"That's not what upsets me. What upsets me is that I don't think we'll get much joy from this new state of affairs."

"Why, Seryozha? Why won't there be any joy for us?"

"Because my love for you, Katerina Lvovna, makes me want to see you live like a real lady, not the way you've lived until now," said Sergey Filipovich. "But it's turning out the other way around: with the decrease in capital, we'll be worse off than ever."

"But what does it matter, Sergey?"

"It may well be, Katerina Lvovna, that it doesn't matter to you, but to me, since I hold you in such esteem, and because of the way it will look to other people, who are always mean and envious, it will be terribly painful. You, of course, can think what you like, but it's only too clear to my judgment that, under these circumstances, I shall never be happy."

And Sergey harped on about how, because of Fedya Lyamin, he himself was now the unhappiest of men, deprived as he was of the opportunity to elevate and exalt Katerina Lvovna in the eyes of all his fellow merchants. And he always ended by pointing out that, but for this Fedya, Katerina Lvovna would be giving birth to an heir, less than nine months since her husband had gone missing, that the entire estate would have been hers, and there would be no end to their happiness.

10

All of a sudden Sergey stopped talking about Fedya. And no sooner had the name of Fedya Lyamin ceased to fall from Sergey's lips than it lodged itself firmly in the mind and heart of Katerina Lvovna. She grew so preoccupied that she even turned cold toward Sergey. No matter whether she was asleep in bed, out on business, or praying to God, one and the same thought was always on her mind: "It just isn't right! Why should I lose my inheritance because of this boy? When I think of all I've suffered, of the burden of sin I've taken upon my soul. And then along he comes and takes everything from me, just like that! And he isn't even a man—a mere child, a mere boy!"

The first frosts were setting in. There was, of course, no news from anywhere about Zinovy Borisovich.

Katerina Lvovna continued to look preoccupied and grew bigger and bigger, and much amazement was expressed in the town as to how young Izmailova, who had always been barren and who had been growing so thin she might have been wasting away, could suddenly have begun to swell out in front. Meanwhile, the young Fedya Lyamin, wearing only a light squirrel-fur jacket, played in the yard, smashing the cat ice that had formed in the ruts.

"What's got into you, Fyodor Zakharov?" Aksinya the cook would call out as he ran across the yard. "Poking about in puddles—is that any way for a merchant's son to behave?"

But the young heir, whose presence so troubled Katerina Lvovna and the object of her affections, played about as serenely as a kid goat and slept still more serenely in the room of the elderly aunt who was bringing him up; not for even a moment did he suspect that he might be standing in anyone's way or diminishing their happiness.

Then Fedya came down with chicken pox, as well as catching a cold in the chest, and he was put to bed. At first he was treated with herbs; later they sent for a doctor.

The doctor paid frequent visits and prescribed medicines to be given to the boy at regular intervals. Usually his aunt gave them to him herself; sometimes she would ask Katerina Lvovna.

"Dearest Katerina," she would say, "you're heavy with child, you're waiting for the will of God yourself. Do me a little kindness."

Katerina Lvovna never refused. When the old woman went to the vigil to pray for "young Fyodor, lying on his sickbed" or when she went to early mass so she could bring him back a particle of offering bread, Katerina Lvovna would sit beside him, giving him water to drink and making sure he took his medicine at the right time. And then one November evening, the eve of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, the old woman went out, meaning to attend both vespers and the vigil. She begged her dear Katerinushka to look after her dearest Fedyushka. By then the boy was on the mend.

When Katerina Lvovna went into his room, she found Fedya sitting up in bed in his squirrel-fur jacket, reading the *Lives of the Holy Fathers*.

"What are you reading, Fedya?" she asked, as she sat down in the armchair.

"I'm reading the *Lives*, Auntie."

"Are they interesting?"

"Yes, Auntie, they're very interesting indeed."

Katerina Lvovna leaned her head on one hand and began to watch Fedya's gently moving lips. Suddenly it was as if demons had slipped their chains, and she was gripped once again by thoughts about how much evil this boy was doing her and how much better it would be if he were gone.

"Yes," she said to herself. "He's ill. He has to take medicine. And when you're ill . . . Yes, anything can happen. I can simply say the doctor gave him the wrong medicine."

"I think it's time for your medicine, Fedya."

"Thank you, Auntie." He swallowed his spoonful of medicine. "This book's very interesting, Auntie. It tells you all about the saints."

"Very good," she said. She glanced coldly around the room; her eyes came to rest on the frost-patterned windows. "It's time to close the shutters," she said, and went into the front room. From there she went to the dining hall, and then up to her attic, where she sat down.

Five minutes later, Sergey joined her there; he was wearing a fine sheepskin jacket trimmed with downy sealskin.

"Have the shutters been closed?" asked Katerina Lvovna.

"Yes," said Sergey curtly, trimming the candle with a pair of scissors and then standing beside the stove.

They were silent.

"The vigil will go on a long time tonight, won't it?" asked Katerina Lvovna.

"Tomorrow's one of the great feast days. The service will go on for ages," Sergey replied.

There was another pause.

"I'd better go and look in on Fedya. He's alone," said Katerina Lvovna, getting to her feet.

"Alone?" asked Sergey, looking at her intently.

"Yes," she whispered. "What of it?"

And something like lightning seemed to flash between their eyes, though neither of them said another word.

Katerina Lvovna went downstairs and walked through the empty rooms. It was quiet everywhere; the icon lamps were shining peacefully; her own shadow slid about the walls; the shuttered windows were thawing out now and beginning to weep. Fedya was sitting and reading. Seeing Katerina Lvovna, he said, "Auntie, please can you put this book away for me and give me the one from the icon case?"

Katerina Lvovna did as her nephew asked and gave him the book.

“Don’t you want to go to sleep now, Fedya?”

“No, I’m going to wait for Babushka to come back.”

“Why?”

“She promised to bring me a piece of bread that’s been blessed.”

Katerina Lvovna went pale; her own child had stirred inside her for the first time, beneath her heart, and a chill passed through her. She stood in the middle of the room and then went out, rubbing her cold hands together.

“Now,” she whispered, as she went quietly into her bedroom and found Sergey still standing beside the stove.

“What?” he asked, almost inaudibly. He cleared his throat.

“He’s alone.”

Sergey raised his eyebrows and began to breathe heavily.

“Come on,” said Katerina Lvovna, turning abruptly toward the door.

Sergey quickly took off his boots and asked, “Do we need anything?”

“No,” said Katerina Lvovna under her breath. And, taking Sergey by the hand, she led him quietly out of the room.

11

When Katerina Lvovna entered his room for a third time, the sick boy shuddered and dropped his book on his knees.

“What’s the matter, Fedya?”

“Oh, Auntie, something frightened me,” he answered, giving her a troubled smile and curling himself up in a corner of the bed.

“What was it?”

“Who was with you just now, Auntie?”

“What do you mean, darling? There wasn’t anyone with me.”

“Are you sure?”

The boy stretched out toward the foot of the bed. Screwing up his eyes, he stared at the doorway through which his auntie had just entered. He calmed down.

“I must have imagined it,” he said.

Katerina Lvovna stopped for a moment, leaning one elbow against the headboard of the boy’s bed.

Fedya looked up at his auntie and said that she looked terribly pale.

By way of an answer, Katerina Lvovna just pretended to cough and looked expectantly toward the door into the front room. But there was no sound, just a creak from one of the floorboards.

“Auntie, I’m reading the life of my guardian angel, Saint Theodore Stratelates.[2] How well he served God!”

Katerina Lvovna stood there without a word.

“Do you want to sit down, Auntie, and I’ll read to you?” Fedya asked affectionately.

“Yes, in a moment, but first let me trim the wick of the icon lamp in the hall,” said Katerina Lvovna. She hurried out.

There was the very faintest of whispering in the front room; amid the general silence, however, this reached the boy’s sharp ears.

“Auntie, what is it? Who are you whispering to?” the boy cried out, with tears in his voice. “Come here, Auntie, I’m frightened!” he called a moment later, still more tearfully. Then, thinking she was speaking to him, he heard Katerina Lvovna say, “Now!”

“What are you frightened of?” Katerina Lvovna asked a little hoarsely, striding into the room and standing beside the bed so as to block the boy’s view of the doorway. “Lie down now.”

“But I don’t want to, Auntie.”

“No, Fedya, you must do as I say. It’s time you lay down.”

“But why, Auntie? I really don’t want to.”

“Lie down now, lie down,” Katerina Lvovna repeated, in a voice that had begun to tremble. Seizing him under the armpits, she laid him down with his head on the pillow.

Just then Fedya let out a terrible scream. He had glimpsed Sergey, pale and barefoot.

Katerina Lvovna put her hand over the boy’s mouth, which had dropped open in horror, and shouted, “Quick, hold him still, so he can’t struggle!”

Sergey seized hold of Fedya's arms and legs while Katerina Lvovna, in one movement, covered the child's face with a large feather pillow and threw herself across it, her firm resilient bosom pressing down on the pillow.

For a while the room was as quiet as the grave.

"He's dead," whispered Katerina Lvovna. Hardly had she got to her feet to put everything in order when the walls of the silent house, which had witnessed so many crimes, were shaken by deafening blows: windows rattled, floors shook, and the chains of the hanging icon lamps sent fantastic shadows flitting across the walls.

Sergey shuddered and took to his heels; Katerina Lvovna rushed after him, pursued by a terrible uproar. It was as if this house of sin were being rocked to its foundations by unearthly powers.

Katerina Lvovna was concerned that Sergey, driven by terror, might run out into the yard and betray himself through his panic, but he rushed straight up toward the attic.

As he ran up the stairs in the dark, Sergey struck his forehead against a half-open door and fell back down again with a groan; he was out of his mind with superstitious terror. "Zinovy Borisovich, Zinovy Borisovich!" he muttered—and flew head over heels down the staircase, knocking Katerina Lvovna off her feet and taking her with him.

"Where?" she asked.

"There, just above us, flying by with a sheet of iron! There he goes again! Oh! Oh!" cried Sergey. "He's thundering, he's thundering!"

It was clear that many hands were knocking at each of the windows that looked onto the street, and that someone was trying to break down the door.

"You idiot! Get up, you idiot!" shouted Katerina Lvovna. With these words she darted back to Fedya, settled his dead head on the pillow in as natural a position as possible, and resolutely opened the door, through which a large crowd was trying to force its way in.

It was a terrible sight. People were laying siege to the porch; beyond them, armies of strangers were climbing over the high fence into the yard; the street was filled with the hubbub of voices.

Before Katerina Lvovna had time to think, she was forced back inside, crushed by the crowd that had gathered around the porch.

12

The alarm had been raised in the following manner. Though only the capital of a small district, the town where Katerina Lvovna lived was an important center of industry, and on the eve of each of the twelve great feasts its churches were always packed with people; as for the churches named after the feast being celebrated, there was barely room for an apple to fall even in their churchyards. It was the custom on these days for there to be a choir made up of young men from the merchant classes, led by a precentor who was also a lover of the art of singing.

Our people are pious and enthusiastic churchgoers, and they are not without a sense of art. Ecclesiastical magnificence and harmonious "organ-like" singing constitute one of their highest and purest pleasures. When a choir is singing, almost half the town will gather to listen; above all, you are sure to find young men of the merchant and artisan classes—stewards, shop assistants and errand boys, workers from the mills and factories, even the merchants themselves and their better halves—all crowded together into a single church, happy if they can just stand on the porch or listen outside a window, in blazing heat or biting frost, as the deep bass thunders away and a high tenor pours out the most capricious of grace notes.

The parish church nearest to the Izmailovs' house was dedicated to the Presentation in the Temple of the Blessed Virgin and so, on the eve of this feast, while the events we have just related were taking place, the young men of the entire town had assembled there. When the service came to an end, they left in a noisy crowd, discussing the merits of the well-known tenor and the unfortunate awkwardnesses of the no less well-known bass.

Not all of them, however, were discussing the subtleties of the art of singing; some had other things on their minds.

"Hey, I've heard some fine stories about that young Izmailova," said a young machinist, recently arrived from St. Petersburg to take care of a merchant's steam mill, as they approached her house. "I've heard there's love going on all day long between her and her young steward!"

"There's none of us hasn't heard stories about Izmailova," said a sheepskin coat covered in blue cloth. "Seems she hasn't been to church even today."

“Church? That bitch has been rolling in filth for so long she fears neither conscience nor God nor the eyes of others.”

“Look—a light,” said the machinist, pointing to a chink between the shutters.

“Let’s have a peek! Let’s see what they’re up to!” people called out.

The machinist climbed onto the shoulders of two of his comrades and had barely put his eye to the chink when he yelled out, “Help! Murder! Someone’s being suffocated!”

And the machinist desperately began banging at the shutter. A dozen or so other men at once followed his example, leaping up and hammering with their fists on the other windows.

The crowd grew bigger every moment and, as we have seen, the Izmailovs’ house was besieged.

“I saw it myself, I saw it with my own eyes,” the machinist was to testify later, standing over Fedya’s corpse. “They’d forced the boy down on the bed and the two of them were suffocating him.”

Sergey was taken to the police station that evening; Katerina Lvovna was led upstairs to her attic and two policemen were stationed outside the door.

•

The cold in the Izmailovs’ house was unbearable; the stoves were not lit and, what with the crowds of inquisitive townsfolk who kept thronging in, the front door never stayed closed for even a minute. Everyone wanted to look not only at Fedya lying in his coffin but also at another large coffin, its tightly closed lid covered by a broad pall . . . Across Fedya’s forehead lay a white satin band, concealing the red scar left by a postmortem examination carried out on his skull. This had confirmed that Fedya had indeed been suffocated and, when Sergey was led before the corpse, the priest’s very first words about the Last Judgment and the punishment of the unrepentant had reduced him to tears; not only did he at once confess to the murder of Fedya but he also begged them to dig up the body of Zinovy Borisovich, who had had no proper funeral. The corpse of Katerina Lvovna’s husband had been lying in dry sand and had not entirely decomposed; it was disinterred and laid in a large coffin. To universal horror, Sergey named the young mistress of the house as his accomplice in both crimes. Katerina Lvovna herself had refused to answer any questions, saying only, “I know nothing, I know absolutely nothing.” Sergey was asked to repeat his statement in her presence. After hearing his confession, she looked at him in mute amazement but without anger and said coolly, “If that’s what he’s taken it into his head to tell you, then why should I deny it? I killed them.”

“Why?” they asked.

“For him,” she said, pointing to Sergey, who was looking down at the floor.

The two accused were taken to prison, and this terrible case, which had provoked such universal outrage, was soon settled in the criminal court. At the end of February, Sergey and Katerina Lvovna, the widow of a merchant of the third guild,[3] both received the same sentence: a flogging in the market square, to be followed by penal servitude in Siberia. On a frosty morning at the beginning of March, the executioner counted off the appointed number of blue-and-crimson weals on Katerina Lvovna’s bare white back, then gave Sergey’s shoulders their fair share of the lash and stamped his handsome face with the three marks of a convict.

Throughout this scene, for some reason, Sergey evoked a great deal more sympathy than Katerina Lvovna. Dirty and bloodstained, he stumbled as he descended from the black scaffold; Katerina Lvovna, however, walked down quite steadily, concerned only to prevent her thick shirt and coarse prison coat from touching her lacerated back.

And even when, in the prison hospital, she was presented with her baby, she merely said, “Oh, who cares!” and without the least sound of complaint, collapsed facedown on the hard prison bed.

13

The day that Sergey and Katerina Lvovna’s detachment of convicts set off was a spring day only according to the calendar; the sun in the heavens was—as people say—shining brightly but warming little.

Katerina Lvovna’s child had been handed over to the care of the old woman, Boris Timofeyevich’s cousin, since, being considered the legitimate son of the felon’s murdered husband, this infant was now sole inheritor of the Izmailov estate. Katerina Lvovna was satisfied with this and gave up her child with complete indifference. Her love for the father, like the love of many excessively passionate women, did not in any way carry over to the child.

But then nothing now existed for her at all, neither light nor dark, neither bad nor good, neither sorrow nor joy. She understood nothing and loved no one, not even herself. Hoping once again to see her dear Seryozha, she was living only for the moment of their departure for Siberia; as for the child, she never gave him a thought.

Katerina Lvovna's hopes were not disappointed; his face branded, his legs shackled with heavy chains, Sergey passed through the prison gates with the same group that she had been assigned to herself. Human beings accustom themselves as best they can to any situation, however awful, and they retain the power to pursue their meager joys. Katerina Lvovna, however, did not need to accommodate herself to anything; she could see her Sergey, and with him beside her even the road to Siberia would flower with happiness.

There were only a few things of value in Katerina Lvovna's cloth bag, and still less ready money. What little she had, however, she soon gave away; long before they reached Nizhny Novgorod, she had given everything to the guards in exchange for permission to walk beside Sergey or to embrace him for an hour in the darkness of night, standing in some cold corner of a narrow transit-prison corridor.

Katerina Lvovna's now branded lover, however, had somehow become most unaffectionate. Whatever he said to her, he said curtly and crossly; and he set no great store on the secret trysts for the sake of which she herself went without food and drink and would part with twenty-five-kopeck pieces from her slender purse. More than once he even said, "What's the good of our meeting just to polish the corners of corridors with our backs? Why give money to the guard when you could be giving it to me?"

"But Seryozhenka, I didn't pay much—only twenty-five kopecks!" she would reply.

"Only twenty-five kopecks! I suppose people give you any number of coins on the road. You're certainly free enough with them yourself!"

"But at least we get to see each other, Seryozha!"

"And what good does that do us? After the torment we've been through, I feel like cursing my whole life. As for lovers' trysts . . ."

"Nothing matters except you, Seryozha. All I want is to see you."

"Oh, what nonsense you talk," Sergey would reply.

Sometimes words like these made Katerina Lvovna bite her lips till they bled, and sometimes, in the darkness of these nocturnal meetings, tears of anger and resentment would well up in her usually dry eyes; yet she put up with everything, never answered back, and went on trying to deceive herself.

And so, with their relations on this new footing, they reached Nizhny Novgorod. Here their group was joined by a detachment that had arrived by the Moscow road; it too was on its way to Siberia.

There were people of all kinds in this large detachment, but two of the women were especially striking: one was a soldier's wife from Yaroslavl by the name of Fiona,[4] a tall, magnificent woman with a thick plait of black hair and languorous brown eyes veiled by thick lashes; the other was a little seventeen-year-old blonde with sharply defined features, delicate rosy skin, a tiny mouth, dimples on her fresh cheeks, and golden curls that strayed capriciously onto her forehead from beneath her convict's head scarf. This girl was known as little Sonya, or Sonetka.[5]

The beautiful Fiona was easygoing and lazy. Everyone in the detachment knew her, and none of the men were especially gratified if they won her favors or upset if they witnessed her favors being granted to another.

"Our Fiona's a good girl, she never turns anyone down," the convicts agreed jokingly.

Sonetka, however, was different.

"Slippery as an eel," they said. "Dances about beside you, but she's not easy to catch."

Sonetka had taste and she liked to pick and choose; she was, in fact, very choosy indeed. She wanted passion to be served up to her not as some common or garden dish but with a highly spiced, piquant sauce, with sufferings and sacrifice. Fiona, on the other hand, was the image of Russian simplicity—too lazy even to tell a man to get lost and knowing nothing except that she was a woman. Such women are highly prized by gangs of thieves, convict detachments, and St. Petersburg social-democratic communes.

The presence of these two women in the same detachment as Sergey and Katerina Lvovna was to spell tragedy for the latter.

14

The moment they set out from Nizhny Novgorod toward Kazan, Sergey quite openly began making a play for Fiona, the soldier's wife —and he met with success. The languid and beautiful Fiona did not make Sergey suffer any more than, with her goodness of heart, she had ever made any man suffer. At their

third or fourth halting place Katerina Lvovna had a word at twilight with one of the guards and bribed him into allowing her to see Sergey; she then lay there awake, waiting for the guard to come and give her a quiet nudge and whisper, “Off with you now!” The door opened and a woman darted out into the corridor; the door opened a second time and another woman jumped down from her place on the bed boards and followed the guard out; at last someone tugged at the coat lying on top of Katerina Lvovna. She quickly got up from the bed boards, which had been worn smooth by the sides of countless convicts, threw the coat over her shoulders, and nudged the guard waiting in front of her.

As Katerina Lvovna walked down a corridor lit only by one dim oil lamp, she stumbled over two or three couples whom it was quite impossible to make out except from close up. As she approached the men’s section, she heard muffled laughter coming through the peephole cut in the door.

“A grand time those pigs are having!” muttered the guard. Taking Katerina Lvovna by the shoulders, he pushed her into a corner and made off.

Katerina Lvovna groped about her. One hand touched a coat and a beard; the other—the hot face of a woman.

“Who is it?” Sergey asked under his breath.

“What . . . Who . . . Who’s *that*?”

In the dark Katerina Lvovna snatched the scarf from her rival’s head. The latter slipped to one side, took to her heels, tripped over someone in the corridor, and fell.

There was a burst of hearty laughter from the other men.

“Bastard!” whispered Katerina Lvovna, whipping Sergey on the face with the ends of the scarf she had pulled off his new girlfriend’s head.

Sergey would have hit back, but Katerina Lvovna shot off down the corridor and returned to her section. The laughter following her from the men’s section, however, was so loud that the guard in the corridor, who had been standing apathetically by the oil lamp and spitting onto the toe cap of one boot, raised his head and bellowed, “Quiet!”

Katerina Lvovna lay down without a word and hardly moved all night. Wanting to say to herself, “I don’t love him,” she felt she loved him more ardently than ever. And before her eyes she kept seeing the palm of his hand trembling beneath *that woman*’s head, and his other arm embracing her hot shoulders.

Poor Katerina Lvovna burst into tears, involuntarily praying for that palm to be lying beneath her own head and that other arm to be embracing her own violently trembling shoulders.

“Come on now, give me back my head scarf,” said Fiona in the morning, waking Katerina Lvovna from her sleep.

“So it was you, was it?”

“Give it back, please!”

“Why are you trying to come between us?”

“I’m not coming between you—he means nothing to me. It’s nothing to get worked up about.”

Katerina Lvovna thought for a moment, took from under her pillow the head scarf she had snatched during the night, threw it at Fiona, and turned her face to the wall.

She felt calmer now.

“Pah!” she said to herself. “Why should I feel jealous? To hell with the painted bitch. She’s no equal of mine—it makes me sick even to think of her.”

“Listen, Katerina Lvovna,” said Sergey, after they had set off the following morning. “I’d like you to get it into your head, first, that I’m no Zinovy Borisovich and, second, that you’re no longer the wife of an important merchant. It’s no use being pigheaded—beggars can’t be choosers!”

Katerina Lvovna said nothing, and for an entire week she walked beside Sergey without the two of them exchanging so much as a word or a look. Being the injured party in this first quarrel she had ever had with Sergey, she stood on her dignity; she had no wish to make the first move herself.

In the meantime Sergey began courting little blond Sonetka. He would bow to her with his “most respectful greetings”; he would smile at her; if she passed by, he would try to put his arms around her and hug her. Katerina Lvovna saw all this, and it enraged her.

“Perhaps I really should try and make up with Sergey,” she would wonder, staggering along, not seeing the ground beneath her feet.

But pride now made it harder than ever for her to make a move. And Sergey was chasing more and more determinedly after Sonetka, and everyone was beginning to see that the inaccessible blonde, whom no one could get their hands on even when she danced about beside them, had all of a sudden grown tamer.

“You were mad at me,” Fiona said to Katerina Lvovna one day, “but what harm did I ever do you? I had my chance, and it’s gone now. But if I were in your shoes, I’d keep an eye on that Sonetka.”

“To hell with my pride,” Katerina Lvovna admonished herself, “I really must make up with him.” All she could think of now was how best to achieve this.

It was Sergey himself who helped her out of her difficulty.

“Lvovna!” he called out to her during one of their halts. “Come and see me for a moment tonight. I’ve got something to say to you.”

Katerina Lvovna said nothing.

“Not still cross with me, are you? Won’t you come?”

Once again Katerina Lvovna made no answer.

But Sergey, like everyone else watching Katerina Lvovna, noticed that, as they approached the transit prison, she edged closer and closer to the senior guard in order to slip him the seventeen kopecks she had collected in alms on the way.

“I’ll give you another ten as soon as I’ve got them,” she said pleadingly.

The guard tucked the money away in the cuff of his coat sleeve and said, “All right then.”

When the negotiations were over, Sergey cleared his throat and winked at Sonetka.

“Oh, Katerina Lvovna!” he said, embracing Katerina on the steps of the transit prison. “Yes, boys, this one’s in a class of her own. There’s not a woman in the world can outshine her.”

Katerina Lvovna blushed, choking with happiness.

Hardly had night fallen when the door gently opened and she went rushing out; trembling all over, she groped her way down the dark corridor in search of Sergey.

“My Katya!” said Sergey, embracing her.

“Oh, my wicked man!” Katerina Lvovna replied through her tears, putting her lips to his.

A sentry came down the corridor, stopped for a moment, spat on his boots, then walked on; from the other side of a door came the snores of weary convicts; a mouse gnawed at a feather; crickets beneath the stove tried their best to out-chirp one another—and Katerina Lvovna was in seventh heaven.

But ecstasies tire, and prose always follows.

“I’m fairly dying of pain,” Sergey lamented, sitting with Katerina Lvovna on the floor, in a corner of the corridor. “Yes, my bones are aching from my ankles all the way up to my knees.”

“But what can we do about it, my darling?” she asked, trying to make herself comfortable under the skirts of his coat.

“Should I try and get myself into a hospital in Kazan?”

“Seryozha—how can you say such a thing?”

“But this pain will be the death of me.”

“Staying behind while I go on—how could you?”

“But what can I do?” Sergey continued a moment later. “The chains grind and grind. Soon they’ll be eating right into the bone. Maybe if I had a pair of woolen stockings . . .”

“Stockings? But Seryozha, I’ve got a pair of new stockings myself!”

“Oh no, I couldn’t . . .”

Without saying another word, Katerina Lvovna darted away, scattered everything from her bag onto the bed boards, and came rushing back to Sergey with a pair of thick blue Bolkhov woolen stockings with brightly colored arrows on the sides.[6]

“Now I’ll be fine,” said Sergey, as he said good night to Katerina Lvovna and took her last pair of stockings.

Happy now, Katerina Lvovna went back to her place on the bed boards and fell fast asleep.

She did not hear Sonetka go out into the corridor, nor did she hear her return only shortly before dawn.

All this happened when they were just two days from Kazan.

15

As they left the stuffy transit prison, the convicts were greeted by a cold, miserable day, with a gusty wind and rain that was turning to snow. Katerina Lvovna was in good spirits; the moment she took her place in the column, however, she went green and started to tremble all over. Her eyes saw only darkness; every joint in her body was weak and aching. In front of her stood Sonetka—wearing a familiar pair of blue woolen stockings with bright arrows.

As they set off, Katerina Lvovna seemed more dead than alive; her eyes, however, followed Sergey with a terrible and unblinking stare.

At the first halt, she walked calmly up to him, whispered “You bastard!” and spat into his eyes. Sergey

would have attacked her, but he was held back.

"Just you wait!" he said, as he wiped his face.

"Aha!" laughed the other convicts. "That one's not frightened of you, is she?" Sonetka's laughter was especially merry; this kind of affair was right up her alley.

"You'll pay for this!" Sergey warned Katerina Lvovna.

Lying in troubled sleep that night on the bed boards of yet another transit prison, worn out and broken in spirit by the long distance and the bad weather, Katerina Lvovna did not hear two men slip into the women's section. As they came in, Sonetka sat up and silently pointed to Katerina Lvovna; then she lay down again and wrapped herself in her coat.

Katerina Lvovna's own coat suddenly went flying over her head; and her back, covered only by a coarse shirt, felt the lash of the thick end of a double-plaited rope being swung with all the might of a peasant's arm.

Katerina Lvovna shrieked, but her voice was stifled by the coat over her head. She struggled to break free, but to no avail: a burly convict was sitting on her shoulders and pinning down her arms.

"Fifty," a voice said at last; it was easy enough to recognize this voice as Sergey's. The nocturnal visitors disappeared straightaway.

Katerina Lvovna freed her head and jumped up. No one was there; all she could hear was a woman giggling beneath her coat. Katerina Lvovna recognized Sonetka's laugh.

The hurt she had suffered was beyond all measure; nor was there any measure to the fury now seething in her heart. She rushed blindly forward—and she collapsed blindly onto the breast of Fiona; Fiona supported her as she fell.

On this full bosom, which had so recently gratified her depraved and faithless lover, she now sobbed out her unbearable grief, pressing herself against her plump, stupid rival as a child presses itself against its mother. They were equal now: both valued at the same price, both discarded.

They were equal: Fiona, who accepted whatever chance brought her, and Katerina Lvovna, acting her role in the drama of love.

Nothing, however, could hurt Katerina Lvovna now. Having shed all her tears, she stood stock-still and waited for the roll call with wooden calm.

The drum was beating—tat-tararat-tat. Fettered and unfettered, the convicts poured out into the yard: Sergey, Fiona, Sonetka, Katerina Lvovna, an Old Believer shackled to a Jew, a Pole on the same chain as a Tatar.

They all crowded together, got themselves into some kind of order and set off.

•

A joyless picture: a handful of people, torn from the world and deprived of any last shadow of hope, sinking into the cold black mud of a dirt road. Everything all around is ugly and terrible: infinite mud, a gray sky, wet leafless willows with sullen crows perched on their spreading branches. The wind howls and gusts, moans and rages.

These hellish, heartrending sounds complete the horror of the scene; in them echoes the advice given to Job by his wife: "Curse the day that thou wast born, and die."

Those who do not wish to hear the meaning of these words, those who, even amid such sorrow, are frightened rather than charmed by the thought of death, must do what they can to drown out these howling voices with something still more hideous. The simple man understands this only too well; giving free rein to all his brutish simplicity, he plays the fool; he jeers at himself, he jeers at others, he jeers at every emotion. Never noted for tenderness, at moments like this he becomes especially evil.

•

"Hello, Madam Merchant, is Your Honor in good health?" Sergey said mockingly to Katerina Lvovna. The village where they had spent the night had just disappeared behind a wet hillock.

With these words he turned to Sonetka, made room for her under his coat, and began to sing in a high falsetto:

In the dark inside the window I glimpse a fair head.
My troublemaker's awake, my tormentor's not sleeping.
Let me throw my coat over you so no one can see.

Sergey embraced Sonetka in front of everyone and gave her a smacking kiss.

Katerina Lvovna saw everything and saw nothing; she might have been no longer alive. People nudged her, remarking on the way Sergey was carrying on with Sonetka. Katerina Lvovna had become a laughingstock.

"Leave her alone," Fiona kept saying, doing her best to defend the stumbling Katerina Lvovna whenever one of the convicts poked fun at her. "The woman's ill. Can't you see, you devils?"

"Must have got her tootsies wet," joked a young convict.

"She had a delicate upbringing," said Sergey. "She's from a merchant family. Now, if only she had a pair of warm stockings," he went on, "she'd be all right."

Katerina Lvovna appeared to wake up.

"Bastard!" she said, suddenly cracking. "Go on, you bastard, jeer all you like!"

"Oh no, Madam Merchant, I'm not jeering. It's just that Sonetka here has some mighty fine stockings to sell and I thought they might be what a merchant's wife fancies."

A number of people laughed. Katerina Lvovna marched on, like an automaton.

The weather got worse and worse. Wet flakes of snow fell from the gray clouds covering the sky; melting as they touched the ground, they made the mud still deeper and more impassable. At last a dark leaden band came into view; beyond it nothing could be made out at all. This was the Volga. A stiff wind was blowing across the river; dark gaping waves slowly rose and fell; the wind drove them this way and that way.

Soaked to the bone and shivering, the convicts went slowly up to the pier and stopped to wait for the ferry.

The ferry drew in, all dark and wet; the crew settled the convicts on board.

"I've heard there's vodka for sale here on this boat," said one convict. Wet flakes of snow were still falling on the ferry, which had put off from the pier and was now tossing about on the river's ever-choppier waves.

"Yes, a drop or two wouldn't go down badly," said Sergey. To amuse Sonetka, he went on tormenting Katerina Lvovna. "I say, Madam Merchant, won't you treat us to a drop of vodka for old time's sake? Don't be mean! O my dear one, remember our former love! Remember, O my joy, what good times we had together! Remember how you and I delighted in the long autumn nights, how we dispatched your family to eternal rest without benefit of clergy."

Katerina Lvovna was shivering with cold. As well as this cold, which had penetrated through her clothes and to the very marrow of her bones, other forces were at work within her. Her head was burning as if from a fever; her pupils were dilated, animated by a sharp wandering brilliance, yet fixed on the rolling waves.

"I could do with some vodka too—this cold's more than I can bear!" Sonetka chimed in.

"Please, Madam Merchant! Go on, stand us a drink!"

"Have you no conscience?" said Fiona, shaking her head reproachfully.

"You should show some shame," said Gordyushka, another of the convicts.

"At least in front of other people!" said Fiona.

"Shut up, you old slut!" Sergey shouted back. "Shame? What have I got to be ashamed of? I don't believe I ever did love her . . . Her ugly old mug means less to me now than one of Sonetka's old shoes. And that's all there is to it. Filthy bitch! She can go love Gordyushka—mean-mouthed Gordyushka." He looked around and happened to see a puny guard wearing a felt cloak and a military cap with a cockade. He went on, "Or maybe she should try her charms on this here officer. At least she'll be out of the rain under his felt cloak."

"And then we could call her Madam Officer," said Sonetka.

"Yes! And she wouldn't be short of money for stockings."

Katerina Lvovna made no attempt to defend herself; she just kept moving her lips and staring more and more intently at the waves. In between Sergey's vile jokes she could hear some kind of groan or rumble coming from the heaving, crashing waves. Out of one breaking wave appeared the blue head of Boris Timofeyevich, and out of another, her husband, swaying from side to side. In his arms he held Fedya, whose head was hanging down against his chest. Katerina Lvovna tried to remember a prayer; she moved her lips, but all they could whisper was "What good times we had together, and how we delighted in the long autumn nights. And how, through terrible death, we robbed people of the light of day."

Katerina Lvovna trembled. Now wilder than ever, her wandering eyes were focused on a single point. Once, twice, her arms stretched out toward somewhere in space, then dropped back again. Suddenly she began to rock and sway; without taking her eyes off the dark waves, she seized Sonetka by the legs and, in a single movement, leaped overboard, taking Sonetka with her.

Everyone froze in astonishment.

Katerina Lvovna appeared on the crest of a wave, then disappeared; another wave revealed Sonetka.

"A boat hook! Throw them a boat hook!" people shouted.

A heavy boat hook flew out on a long rope and fell into the water. Sonetka had disappeared. A few seconds later, as the current swept her away from the ferry, she flung her arms up in the air again, but just then Katerina Lvovna appeared from another wave, rose almost waist-high above the water, and flung herself at Sonetka like a powerful pike attacking a roach. Neither of them was seen again.

1864

Translated by Robert Chandler

THE SEALED ANGEL

A Christmas Story

1

IT ALL happened around Christmas, on New Year's Eve. The weather could not have been worse. There was a furious blizzard, the kind that has made the trans-Volgan steppes notorious: it raged everywhere, driving a lot of people for shelter into an isolated posting inn that stood out, miserable and alone, on the featureless, boundless steppe. Gentry, merchants, and peasants, Russians, Mordvinians, and Chuvash, found themselves all lumped together. In an overnight shelter like this there was no question of respecting rank or title: wherever you turned, there was no room to move; some people tried to get dry, some to get warm, others searched for a cranny to take refuge in. The dark, low-ceilinged peasant house was packed to the rafters with people; their wet clothes filled the place with dense steam and made it airless. Not an inch of free space could be seen: people were lying on the garret boards, the stove, the bunks, even the dirty earthen floor. The host, a sullen peasant, was not pleased by the crowd of guests nor by the prospect of profit. He angrily slammed the gates after the last sleigh, carrying two merchants, came into the yard, then bolted the premises, hung the key over the icon shelf, and announced firmly, "Anyone who wants to come now can bang his head on the gates, but I won't open up."

Hardly had he uttered those words, taken off his gigantic sheepskin coat, crossed himself with an Old Believer's[1] sweep of the arm, as he prepared to climb onto the hot brick stove, than someone timidly knocked at the windowpane. "Who is it?" the host shouted in a loud, disgruntled voice.

"It's us," a muffled reply came through the window.

"Well, and what do you want?"

"For Christ's sake, let us in, we've lost our way . . . and we're frozen."

"Are there a lot of you?"

"Not a lot, not a lot, just eighteen, eighteen of us," came the voice from outside; the man was stuttering and his teeth were chattering: clearly, he was frozen to the marrow of his bones.

"I've got no room for you; the whole house is packed with people already."

"At least let us come in to get warm!"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"We're carters."

"Empty, or loaded?"

"Loaded, pal. We're carrying animal skins."

"Animal skins! You're carrying animal skins, yet you're begging to be let in for the night? People in this country are really getting above themselves! Clear off!"

"But what are they supposed to do?" asked a traveler lying under a bearskin coat on the top bench.

"Pile up the skins and sleep under them, that's what," replied our host, once more cursing the carters roundly before he lay down, motionless, on the stove.

The traveler under the bearskin coat told the host off in no uncertain terms for his harshness, but the host paid no attention and didn't even deign to respond. Instead, in a far corner, a small red-haired fellow with a goatee spoke up: "My dear sir, don't be too hard on our host. He's speaking from experience and his advice is quite right: they're safe under their animal skins."

"Are they?" the traveler under the bearskin coat responded, unconvinced.

"Perfectly safe, sir, and they're better off not being allowed in."

"Why's that?"

"Because now they will get some useful practical experience and, meanwhile, if anyone else manages to get here needing help, there'll be room for him."

"And whom would the devil bring here now?" asked the bearskin.

"Listen, you," intervened the host, "watch your tongue. How could the enemy of mankind send anyone here, when we have such sacred objects? Can't you see we have the icon of the Savior and the face of the Virgin here?"

"True," the red-haired man confirmed. "Anyone who's been saved is led by an angel, not by some devilish Ethiopian."

"That's something I've never seen, and this place is so grim that I refuse to believe I've been brought here by my guardian angel," remarked the talkative bearskin.

The host merely spat angrily, but the red-haired man amiably explained that not everyone could see an

angel's path and only someone really experienced could have any idea of it.

"You talk as if you've had this experience personally," said the bearskin.

"Yes, indeed I have."

"Really? Have you seen an angel, and was he leading you?"

"Yes, sir: I've seen one, and he was guiding me."

"You're not joking or laughing at me, are you?"

"God forbid I should joke about such things."

"Well, what did you actually see? How did the angel manifest itself?"

"My dear sir, that's a very long story."

"You know what? There's no chance of getting any sleep here, that's certain. So it would be an excellent idea if you could tell us the story now."

"As you wish, sir."

"Tell us the story, please: we're listening. But why are you kneeling over there? Come over to us, I'm sure we can move up and find room for you to sit with us."

"No, sir, but thank you all the same. Why should I inconvenience you? Anyway, my story is best told kneeling, because it's a very sacrosanct business, even awe-inspiring."

"As you wish, then, but tell us right away how you saw an angel and what he did to you."

"As you wish: I'll begin."

2

"One look at me will tell you I'm an utterly unimportant person, just a peasant, with a real country peasant's education. I'm not from around here, I'm from a long way away; I'm a stonemason by trade; I was born into the old Russian faith. Because I was an orphan, even when I was a child I went off with people from my village to work away from home, and I've worked in various places, but always with the same people, a gang of traveling builders, led by Luka Kirilov, also a peasant. This Luka Kirilov is still alive: he's our best contractor. His business has been going for ages, it was started by his forefathers, and he hasn't let it go to ruin; he's expanded it and made himself a big fortune. But he's always been a fine man who treats people right. The places we've been to! I reckon there's nowhere in Russia we haven't been, and I've never ever known a better or more reliable boss. Life with him has been like being under a father in a close family, he was not just the contractor in our trade, he was an instructor in our faith. When we traveled with him from job to job, it was just like the Jews wandering the wilderness with Moses: we even had our own iconostasis, like Moses's tabernacle, and we never let it out of our sight. In other words, we had icons, what we call 'God's blessing,' with us. Luka Kirilov was terribly fond of the sacred iconostasis and, gentlemen, all his icons were really marvelous, painted by the most skilled icon painters, ancient icons, either genuine Greeks or by the earliest painters of the Novgorod and Stroganov school. Each icon was outstanding, not because of the setting, but in the precision and flow of their wonderful artistry. I've never seen anything so exalted since.

"All the different icons we had glorifying God! We had Deësis of Christ in Majesty, we had the Image of Edessa where Christ's hair is wet, we had the saints, the martyrs and apostles, and, most wonderful of all, icons of the Acts of the Apostles, such as, for example: the Indiction, where Christ starts the Jewish New Year preaching, the twelve feast days, the Last Judgment, the twelve days of Christmas, the Church Councils, God the Ancient of Days, the Six Days from the Descent into Hell to the Crucifixion, the Healing Saints, the Deësis of Seven Attending, a Trinity with Abraham bowing to the tree of Mamre—in short, words can't describe this splendor, and nowadays nobody paints icons like these, not in Moscow or Petersburg, nor in Palekh. Certainly not in Greece, where the craft died out ages ago. We were passionately fond of all our sacred things, and we burned holy lamp oil before them, and we kept, at the expense of our workshop, a horse and special cart to carry all this divine grace in two big crates everywhere we went. We singled out two icons in particular: one by the Tsar's old Moscow craftsmen on Byzantine themes, where the holy Queen of Heaven prays in the garden and all the trees, cypresses and olives, bow to the earth before her; the other was a guardian angel, of the Stroganov school. Words can't describe the art in these two holy pictures! When you look at the Queen of Heaven and trees that have no soul bowing to her purity, your heart melts and quivers. Just the sight of Michael the guardian angel is pure joy! That angel really was indescribable. I can see his face now, radiant and divine, and so ready to help; his gaze was mild and tender, ribbons hung from his ears to indicate his universal hearing; his raiment blazed, his clothing was of finely wrought gold; his armor was like plumage, his shoulders were girded, he had the image of the infant Christ Emmanuel on his breast; he had a cross in his right hand

and a fiery sword in his left. Wondrous! Wondrous! His hair was wavy and auburn, curling around his ears, and each hair neatly traced with a needle. His wings were wide and as white as snow, with a bright azure color underneath, not a feather or strand out of place. One look at those wings, and your fear just vanishes: you pray 'Make thy shadow as the night . . .' and you become completely calm, and peace reigns in your soul. That's what the icon did! Yes, sir, these icons were for us what the Tabernacle's holy of holies, decorated by Bezalel's wonderful skill, was for the Jews. All the other icons I've spoken about were transported by horse in a special crate of ours, but these two weren't put on the cart; we carried them ourselves. Luka Kirilov's wife, Mikhailitsa, always had the icon of the Queen of Heaven, and Luka himself wore the icon of the angel on his chest. Luka had a special brocade bag, silk over colored homespun, made for this icon: it had a scarlet cross in front made from real damask silk, and a thick green silk cord was attached to the top, so it could hang from his neck. Wherever Luka went, so the icon preceded us in its bag around Luka's neck, as if the angel were leading us in procession. We'd move from one place to another, crossing the steppes to a new job; Luka would be ahead, waving a carved wooden yard measure instead of a stick, and Mikhailitsa with her icon of the Virgin would follow in the cart, with the rest of the company walking behind. There were flowers and grasses in the fields, in some places cattle were grazing, while the plovers played their panpipes . . . it was sheer delight for heart and mind! Everything was fine for us, and every job we did was wonderfully successful: we found good work. We never quarreled; we had nothing but reassuring news from home. That was why we blessed the angel that led us on our way, and it would have been easier to part with our lives, I think, than to part with the angel's miraculous icon.

"Could we possibly have imagined that somehow, by any chance, we would lose this, our most precious and sacred possession? Yet that was the grievous loss in store and predestined for us, as we realized only later, not by human treachery but by the providence of the force leading us on. The angel himself wished affliction on his own head, so as to give us a sacred insight into grief and thus show us the true path, compared with which all the paths we had walked until then were a dark and trackless thick forest. But, please, tell me if my story is of interest, or am I wasting your time telling it?"

"No, of course not, of course not: please go on," we exclaimed, for we were intrigued by his tale.

"Very well, gentlemen: I'll do as you say and begin to set out, the best I can, the extraordinary wonders the angel brought upon us."

3

"We arrived on the outskirts of a major city for a big job: constructing the stone bridge that is so famous now, over the fast-flowing Dnieper River. The city is on the steep right bank of the river; we were based in the sloping meadows of the left bank, so we had a wide view of a wonderful scene: ancient churches, holy monasteries with lots of sacred relicts; lush gardens and the sort of trees you see in old books with illuminated chapter headings—tall, columnar poplars. When you look at all this, it's as if someone is plucking at your heartstrings; it's so beautiful! Of course, you know we're simple people, but we can still feel the loveliness of God's natural creation.

"Well, this place appealed to us so strongly that on our very first day we began building ourselves temporary accommodations: first of all, we drove in tall piles, because the ground was low, right by the water, and then, on the piles, we began assembling one-room living quarters, with a small storage room built onto them. We installed all our sacred things, as our forefathers' rules prescribed, in their proper place in the living quarters, we set out the three stages of our folding iconostasis against the length of one wall: the first, the kneeling stage, was for big icons, the one above that was the long joist for the smaller icons, and then we put up a ladder for the crucifixion icon at the top; we set the angel on the lectern at which Luka Kirilov read Scripture. Luka Kirilov and his wife, Mikhailitsa, set up their quarters in the small room, and we set up beds for ourselves next door, which turned our quarters into a small barrack next to them. Other men who'd come to work here long-term looked at what we'd done and began building themselves the same accommodations, so we now had our own little town on piles opposite the great metropolis. We got down to work and everything went as it should! We were paid the right amount on account by the Englishmen in the office; God gave us such good health that nobody fell ill that summer, and Mikhailitsa even complained that she didn't like putting on so much weight. What we Old Believers particularly liked was that here we enjoyed freedom, whereas at that period we were everywhere and all the time persecuted for our religious rites: there were no city or district authorities here, there was no priest; we didn't have to face anyone, and nobody was bothered by our religion or interfered with it . . . We prayed as much as we liked: we worked the hours, and then gathered in the

living quarters, where all the sacred things shone so brightly in the light of the icon lamps that your heart blazed with fire. Luka Kirilov would begin with the prayer of blessing, and we would all join in and praise God so loudly that sometimes, when the air was still, we could be heard far from our township. Nobody minded our faith, many people even seemed to get used to it: it was liked not just by simple folk, who easily accept the Russian way of worshipping God, but even by those of other faiths. A lot of Orthodox churchgoers, ones with pious temperaments, if they didn't have time to cross the river to go to church, stood outside our windows, listened, and started to pray. We didn't forbid them to do this outside: we couldn't have driven everyone away, because even foreigners interested in the ancient Russian rites came several times to listen to our singing, of which they approved. The chief English engineer, Yakov Yakovlevich, would come and stand by the window, with papers under his arm, doing his best to note down our singing, and then, when he was going around the site, he kept on humming after his own fashion, 'Lo-o-rd God, show Thyself to us!' Of course, it all sounded utterly different when he sang it, because the singing we write down with neumes can't be recorded properly with Western notation. The English, to give them their due, were a solid, God-fearing lot; they were very fond of us and considered us good people: they praised us. In short, the Lord's angel had brought us to a good place and opened everyone's hearts to us as well as all nature's scenery.

"We lived for nearly three years in this spirit of peace and quiet that I've described. We all thrived; it was as if a cornucopia were pouring good luck over us. Then suddenly we saw that in our midst there were among us two vessels chosen by God to chastise us. One of these vessels was the blacksmith Maroi; the other was the bookkeeper Pimen Ivanov. Maroi was simpleminded, in fact, illiterate, something rare among Old Believers, but he was peculiar—he looked as clumsy as a camel, and he had a paunch like a wild boar's. Two arms would only go around half his waist, and his forehead was covered with a rough tuft of hair, like an old ant lion's; the top of his head was shaved like a monk's tonsure. His speech was thick, tongue-tied, and hard to understand, and he himself was dim and so inept at everything that he couldn't even learn his prayers by heart—he just kept repeating one and the same phrase. But he could see into the future and had the gift of prophesy: he could hint at what was actually going to happen. Pimen, on the other hand, was a fancy dresser; he liked to put on airs, and when he spoke, he phrased things so cunningly that you were astounded. Yet he had an easygoing, likable character. Maroi was elderly, over seventy; Pimen was middle-aged and elegant, with curly hair and a parting midway down his head; big thick eyebrows, a face flushed red, a real Belial. In these two vessels a sour vinegar was brewing, which we were destined to drink."

4

"The bridge we were building on eight granite piers had already taken shape, high above the water: in the summer of the fourth year we began fixing iron chains to the piers. But there was a short delay: when we began unrolling the chains and making the steel rivets fit the right holes, it turned out that many of the bolts were too long and had to be cut shorter. But every one of those bolts was made of English-style bars, all manufactured in England, cast from the very strongest steel and as thick as a grown man's arm. You couldn't heat up these bolts, because that would weaken the steel, but there was no tool that would saw through them. Our Maroi the blacksmith, however, invented a way of dealing with this: he greased the place where the bolt had to be cut with a mix of sharp sand and thick tar used to grease cart wheels, then he put a whole bolt into the snow and poured salt over it, before turning and twisting it; then he snatched it out quickly and put it on a red-hot anvil. One whack with a sledgehammer, and the end of the bolt snapped off, like scissors going through a wax candle. All the Englishmen and Germans came to look at Maroi's cunning solution: they stared and stared and suddenly burst out laughing, first talking among themselves in their own languages, then saying in our language, 'Right, Russian! You clever! You understand physics good!'

"As if Maroi could understand physics! He hadn't the slightest inkling of any science; he just devised things as the Lord inspired him to. But our Pimen Ivanov went around boasting about it. Whatever the reaction, it was bad. Some of his listeners ascribed everything to science, which our Maroi was utterly ignorant of; others said it was the manifest grace of God working miracles such as we'd never seen before. The latter explanation was, for us, worse than the first. I've told you that Pimen Ivanov had his weaknesses: he liked the pleasures of the flesh. Now I'll explain why we still kept him on in our company: his job was to fetch provisions for us from town and buy anything we needed; we sent him to the post office to mail our identity papers and money back to our homes, and he would collect our new identity papers. Generally, he did all this paperwork, and, to be frank, in this respect he was someone

essential, and even very useful to us. A real, serious Old Believer naturally always shuns such hassle and loathes dealing with officials, because they give us nothing but trouble, but Pimen enjoyed the bother and he had a wide circle of friends across the river in the city. Traders and gentry, whom he needed to contact on our company business, knew him and considered him our top man. Naturally, we laughed about that: he was desperately fond of drinking tea and blathering a lot with these gentlemen. They addressed him as our boss, and he just smiled and let his beard fall all the way to his belly. In other words, he was a straw man. By some misfortune our Pimen fell in with a fairly important person whose wife came from our part of the world; she, too, was talkative and she'd read about us in some modern books, though what's said about us, we don't know. Suddenly, I don't know why, she got it into her mind that she was very interested in Old Believers. And that's the astounding thing: Why was she chosen as a vessel? All right, she was still taken with us, and whenever our Pimen came to see her husband about something, she was bound to have him sit down for tea, and he was only too happy to do so and would get carried away talking.

"She talks her woman's vain nonsense, saying we were Old Believers and such and such and so on, holy men, just men, eternally blessed: our Belial gives her a sideways look, his head on one side, strokes his beard, and says in honeyed tones, 'Indeed, madam. We observe our forefathers' laws; we keep to such and such rules and watch over one another to see that our customs are kept pure.' In a word, he says a lot of things that are inappropriate for a conversation with a laywoman. And you can imagine the interest she takes.

" 'I've heard,' she said, 'that God sends His blessings to you in visible form.'

"Pimen immediately follows up with, 'Of course, madam, He does, they are perfectly visible.'

" 'Visible?'

" 'Visible, madam, visible. Only a few days ago one of our men clipped a mighty piece of steel as if it were a spiderweb.'

"The little lady clapped her hands together. 'Oh, how interesting! Oh, I'm terribly fond of miracles: I believe in them. You know, please tell your Old Believers to pray that God gives me a daughter. I have two sons, but I really want a daughter. Can you do that?'

" 'We can, madam,' Pimen answered. 'Why not? Very easily. But in cases like yours, it's always essential that you donate for consecrated oil to burn in the icon lamps.'

"She was only too happy to give him ten rubles for the oil; he pocketed the money and said, 'Fine, be of good hope, I'll see it's done.'

"Of course, Pimen doesn't tell us anything about this. The lady has a daughter. Ugh! She made such a song and dance about it; when she was just recovering from the birth, she calls for our blatherer, treats him as if he were the miracle worker himself, and he just laps it up. So trivial does a man become, so dim does his mind become, so utterly lacking in feeling. A year later the lady has another request for our God, she wants her husband to rent a summer cottage; again, her wish is granted, and she keeps giving Pimen offerings for candles and icon oil; he places these offerings where he thinks he ought to, not that we see a penny of them. In fact, incomprehensible miracles were being performed: this lady's eldest son was at school, and he was the most depraved boy, an idle oaf, never learning anything, but when examination time came, she sent for Pimen and gave him the job of praying for her son to be allowed to graduate to the next class. Pimen said, 'That's difficult: I'll have to get all our men together to pray at night and implore God with candles until morning.'

"She was prepared to spend anything: she handed him thirty rubles, just so we would pray! Can you imagine? Her debauched son had a stroke of luck and progressed to the top class. The lady nearly went mad with joy at the favors God was doing her! She began giving Pimen order after order, and he persuaded God to give her health, an inheritance, and for her husband promotion to high rank and more medals than he could pin on his chest: he had, they said, to carry one medal in his pocket. A miracle, nothing less, but we knew nothing about it. But the time came for all this to come to light and for one set of miracles to be superseded by another."

5

"There was trouble with Jewish business dealings in a certain Jewish town of the province where we were working. I can't tell you exactly why—whether they were using forged money, or whether they were not paying trade taxes—whatever it was, the authorities had to investigate, and a substantial reward was in the offing. So the little lady sends for our Pimen and tells him, 'Pimen Ivanovich, here's twenty rubles for you to buy candles and lamp oil: tell your people to pray as hard as they can for my

husband to be sent on this investigation.'

"That was no problem for Pimen: by now he was obsessed with collecting his lamp-oil taxes. So he replied, 'Fine, madam: I'll tell them to do so.'

" 'Make sure they pray really well,' she said, 'because I want this very badly.'

" 'Madam, as if they'd dare not pray well when I give the orders,' Pimen reassured her. 'I'll wear them down with fasting until their prayers are answered.' He took the money and vanished; that very night the husband won the appointment his spouse desired so badly.

"This act of grace stunned her so much that our prayers were no longer enough for her: she felt that she absolutely must personally sing the praises of our sacred icons. When she told Pimen this, he was disconcerted, for he knew that our people would never let her come and see their sacred icons. But the lady would not back down. 'Whether you like it or not,' she said, 'this evening I shall take a boat and bring my son to see you.'

"Pimen tried to persuade her that it would be better if we did the praying, that we had a guardian angel, that she should make a donation for the lamp oil, and we would put the future of her husband in the angel's hands.

" 'Oh, excellent,' she replied, 'excellent. I'm very glad that you have this angel: so here's the money for the lamp oil, you must be sure to light three lamps in front of his icon, and I'll come and watch.'

"Pimen was now in trouble: he came home and began apologizing to us, saying that, what with one thing and another, he had failed to oppose her, this vile heretic, when she expressed her wishes, because we needed her husband on our side: he told us a whole pack of lies, and still failed to reveal everything he had done. Well, however disagreeable it was for us, we had no choice: we quickly removed all our icons from the walls, packed them in crates, and took various substitute icons, which we kept secretly, for fear of a raid by government officials, to put on the lower icon shelf; then we waited for our visitor. She duly arrived, all dressed to the nines: it was terrible—she swept over everything with her long, wide hems, looked through her lorgnette at our substitute icons, and asked us, 'Tell me, please, which of these is the miracle-working angel?' We were at a loss, not knowing how to distract her from the subject.

" 'We don't have such an angel,' we said.

"No matter how persistent she was, or how she reproached Pimen, we wouldn't show her our angel but hurriedly took her away for tea and whatever snacks we could offer her. We disliked her intensely, and God knows why: there was something off-putting about her appearance, even though she was considered to be beautiful. She was tall, you know, leggy, as lanky as a steppe goat, with bushy eyebrows."

"Don't you like that sort of beautiful woman?" the bearskin interrupted the narrator.

"Heavens above, what's there to like in a woman who looks like a snake?"

"Do you people think a woman is beautiful if she looks like a mound of earth?"

"A mound of earth?" repeated the storyteller, who smiled and was not in the least offended. "What makes you think that? We have the genuine Russian understanding of a woman's figure, and we respect our own type, which we think is far more appropriate than frivolous modern ideas, and nothing like a mound of earth at all. True, we don't have time for long-legged women, we like a woman to have strong legs, not long ones, we don't want her stumbling about: we like her to move as smoothly as a rolling ball and always keep up, whereas a leggy woman who tries to run will only trip. We don't have time for women with snake hips, either: for us a woman has to have plenty of belly and a big bosom, because, even if it doesn't make for a fine figure, it does show that she can be a mother. And our breed of real Russian women may have pubes that are on the plump and fleshy side, but soft pubes are more fun and more welcoming. The same goes for the nose: our women don't have fish-shaped noses; they have little pug noses, and, whatever you think, a pug nose is much more easygoing in family life than a proud, dry nose. Eyebrows are particularly important: the eyebrows open up the face, and so a woman's eyebrows mustn't frown, they should be like an open arch, because it's far more attractive for a man to talk to a woman like that, and she makes any man feel much more inclined to domestic life. But modern tastes, of course, have abandoned this good type and approve of women who are airy and ephemeral, which is a great pity. But, I apologize: I can see we have strayed from the subject. I should go back to my story.

"Our Pimen, being preoccupied with vain things, saw that once we'd seen our visitor off, we started to criticize her. He said, 'Why are you like this? She's a good woman.'

"We retorted, 'How can she be a good woman when there's nothing good about her appearance? But forget about her: let her be whatever she is.' We were glad enough to have seen the back of her, and we started burning incense so that there would be nothing left of her, sight or scent. After that we swept all traces of our visitor from our quarters; we put the substitute icons back in the crates behind the screen and fetched our real icons, placing them along the shelves as they had been and sprinkling them with holy water. Then we said our introit, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner,' and each of us went to his own

bed for the night, but, God alone knows why, for some reason nobody could get to sleep: we felt an uncanny anxiety."

6

"The next morning we all went to work and got on with our jobs, but Luka Kirilov wasn't there. Considering his punctuality, this was astounding, but even more astounding, I thought, was his arrival just before eight o'clock: he was very pale and distraught. I knew he was a self-possessed man and not easily upset by trivial things, so I took note of his state and asked, 'What's wrong, Luka Kirilov?' He told me, 'I'll tell you later.'

"I was young at the time and terribly inquisitive; furthermore, I was suddenly struck by a premonition that it was something bad, to do with our faith. I revered our faith and I was never a doubter. That was why I couldn't stay patient for long; on the first pretext I left work and rushed home. I thought that there'd be nobody at home and I could find out something from Mikhailitsa. Although Luka Kirilov hid things from her, for all her simplemindedness she had ways of seeing through him. She wouldn't conceal anything from me because I, as an orphan, had been raised ever since childhood as if I were her son, and she was as good as a second mother to me.

"So, gentlemen, I made straight for her and, when I looked, I saw she was sitting on the porch, a jacket over her shoulders; she looked ill, sad, and somehow greenish.

" 'Foster mother, why are you sitting there?'

"She replied, 'Where else can I perch, Marochka?'

"My name is Mark Aleksandrov, but she called me Marochka out of maternal feeling. 'What possible reason,' I wondered, 'can there be for her to say she has nowhere to perch?'

" 'But why don't you lie down in your little room?'

" 'I can't, Marochka,' she said. 'Maroi is praying in the big room.'

"I thought, 'Aha! So that's it: something has happened to do with the faith.' Then Auntie Mikhailitsa began talking: 'I suppose you don't know, Marochka, what happened here in the night, do you?'

" 'No, foster mother, I don't.'

" 'Oh, terrible things!'

" 'Then tell me, quickly, foster mother.'

" 'Oh, I don't know whether I can tell you.'

" 'Why won't you tell me? I'm not a stranger, am I? Am I not like a son to you?'

" 'I know, my dear,' she replied, 'that you're like a son, but I'm not sure enough of myself being able to put it to you as I should, because I have no sense or talent; just wait a bit—Uncle will come when work's over and I expect he'll tell you everything.'

"But there was no way I could wait that long, and I pestered her to tell me now everything that had happened. I could see she kept blinking and blinking, and her eyes were full of tears: then she suddenly wiped them with the cloth around her neck and quietly whispered to me, 'Child, last night our guardian angel left.'

"This revelation made me tremble all over. 'Tell me quickly,' I said, 'how could such a mysterious thing happen, and who witnessed it?'

" 'Child, there are mysteries that cannot be understood, and there were no witnesses apart from me, because all this happened in the dead of night, and I was the only one awake.'

"Gentlemen, she told me the following story:

" 'I said my prayers and went to sleep; I don't remember how long I slept, but suddenly I dreamed of a fire, a big fire, everything we had seemed to have burned up, and the river was carrying away the ashes, which were swirling around the piers and then swallowed in the depths, sucked down.' As for herself, Mikhailitsa thought she had jumped out wearing nothing but an old nightshirt covered in holes, that she was standing by the water's edge, and, opposite her, on the other bank, a tall red pillar was soaring up, with a small white cockerel flapping its wings on top. Mikhailitsa dreamed, she said, 'Who are you?' because she sensed that this bird was prophesying something. The cockerel suddenly proclaimed in a human voice 'Amen!' and then hung its head; it disappeared and Mikhailitsa was surrounded by such stillness and rarefied air that she became afraid and unable to breathe. When she woke up, she was in bed, but could hear a lamb bleat just by the door to her room. She could tell by its voice that it was not even old enough for its first sheering. Its 'ba-a-a' rang out in a pure, silvery voice; suddenly Mikhailitsa sensed that the lamb was walking along the room where they prayed, its hooves rapidly clattering over the floorboards, as if it was looking for somebody. Mikhailitsa's mind searched for an explanation: 'Lord

Jesus Christ, what is this? There isn't a single sheep in the whole of our settlement, so how can there be lambs, and where has this milk lamb come from, running into our house like that?' She was so startled that she trembled. 'And how did it get into the house? That means we must have forgotten in all the confusion yesterday to lock the front door; thank God it was a lamb and not a yard dog getting in among the icons.' She then went and woke up Luka. 'Luka,' she called, 'Luka! Dearest, wake up, the door's open and some suckling lamb has got into the house.' Luka Kirilov, however, was fast asleep, as luck would have it. However much Mikhailitsa tried to wake him up, she failed: he made bellowing sounds but didn't utter a word. When Mikhailitsa shook him even harder and moved his body about, he just bellowed louder. Mikhailitsa implored him to 'at least recite the prayer to Jesus,' but the moment she uttered that name someone shrieked in the main room, and Luka instantly leaped from his bed and rushed out, only to be knocked back by what seemed to be a bronze wall. 'Light a candle, light a candle quickly,' he shouted to Mikhailitsa, but didn't move an inch. Mikhailitsa lit a candle and ran out; his face was as pale as the face of a man just sentenced to death; he was trembling so much that not only did his collar loop move around his neck but his trousers shook too. His wife confronted him again: 'Husband, what's happened to you?' He silently pointed a finger at an empty space where the icon of the angel had hung: the icon itself was lying on the floor right by his feet.

"Luka Kirilov went straight up to Granddad Maroi, told him in full what his wife had seen and what had happened to us. 'Come and look,' he said. Maroi came and kneeled down by the icon of the angel lying on the floor. Maroi stayed motionless on his knees for some time, like a marble statue over a tombstone. Then he raised his hand, scratched the bald patch on his head, and said quietly, 'Bring twelve clean clay tiles straight from the kiln.'

"Luka Kirilov immediately brought the tiles; Maroi inspected them to check that they were all clean and straight from the hot kiln; he told Luka to pile them up, thus making a pillar that we covered with a clean napkin before placing the icon on it, after which Maroi bowed to the ground and proclaimed, 'Angel of the Lord, may your footsteps be directed wherever you wish!'

"No sooner had he uttered those words than there was a knock at the door, and a stranger's voice called out, 'Hey, you dissenters, who's your boss?'

"Luka Kirilov opened the door and saw a soldier, decorated with a medal, standing there. Luka asked him which boss the soldier wanted to see. The soldier replied, 'The one who's been going to see the lady; the one called Pimen.'

"Naturally, Luka sent his wife to fetch Pimen, and he asked what was going on, why Pimen was being sent for in the middle of the night.

"The soldier said, 'I don't know exactly, but they say that the Jews over there played some nasty trick on the master.' What exactly the trick was, he couldn't say. 'What I've heard is that the master sealed them up, and they then sealed his fate.'

"But he couldn't say anything sensible about how they could have sealed each other.

"By now, Pimen had turned up; just like a Jew's, his eyes darted left and right: clearly, he didn't know what to say. Luka ordered him: 'Whatever tricks you're up to, you knave, go and put an end to them!' Pimen and the soldier got into a boat and crossed the river.

"An hour later our Pimen came back and tried to bluster it out, but it was clear that he felt extremely worried. Luka questioned him, 'Speak, you wastrel, why don't you tell us frankly what you've been up to there?'

" 'Nothing,' said Pimen.

"And it was left at that, but it turned out to be the opposite of nothing."

7

"Something really bewildering had happened to the gentleman for whom Pimen had prayed. As I said, he'd gone to the Jewish town, where he arrived late at night when nobody had an inkling of his presence. He immediately sealed every single shop and informed the police that the next morning he would carry out an inspection. Of course the Jews found out about this right away and went to see him that very night to ask him to negotiate about the illegal goods, of which they had an enormous quantity. When they came, they thrust ten thousand rubles at the gentleman, who replied, 'I can't: I'm an important official; I have the confidence of the highest authorities and I don't take bribes.' The Jews mumbled to one another, and then offered him fifteen thousand. Again he said, 'I can't!' They offered twenty thousand. He said, 'Why can't you understand that *I cannot*, I've already informed the police that tomorrow we'll carry out a joint inspection.' The Jews mumbled some more, and explained with a

snigger, ‘It doesn’t matter, Your Grace, if you told the police: we give you twenty-five thousand, and all you have to do is lend us your seal until tomorrow morning and go to bed for a nice quiet night’s sleep—that’s all we ask.’

“The gentleman pondered and pondered; even though he considered himself an important person, important persons, clearly, were not stonyhearted: he took the twenty-five thousand and gave them the seal he used on suspect premises, and then went to bed. The Jews, naturally, dragged out of their stores everything that needed to be hidden and then resealed the premises with the same seal. While the gentleman was still asleep, they were back in his entry hall gabbling away. He let them in and they thanked him, saying, ‘Now, Your Excellency, you go ahead with your inspection.’

“The official appeared not to have heard this. He said, ‘Give me my seal back, now!’

“The Jews replied, ‘Then you give us our money.’

“ ‘What?’ exclaimed the gentleman. ‘What do you mean?’ But the Jews insisted, ‘We gave the money as a deposit.’

“The gentleman asked, ‘As a deposit for what?’

“ ‘Come on: we gave you a deposit.’

“ ‘You’re lying,’ he said. ‘You really are scoundrels, you betrayers of Christ, you gave me the money outright.’

“The Jews were jostling one another and laughing. ‘*Hörest du*, hear that: we’re supposed to have given it to him . . . Hmm, hmm! Ach, ach, do you think we’d be so stupid, such simple peasants, as to *schmeer* such an important person?’ (*Schmeer* was their word for bribe.)

“Well, gentleman, you couldn’t make it up if you tried, could you? The gentleman should have handed over the money, of course, and that would have been the last of it, but he was still on his high horse, because he didn’t want to part with it. Morning came: all the town’s trade was at a standstill. People walked about in dismay; the police demanded the seal back, but the Jews were yelling, ‘Ach, ach, what sort of state administration is this? The top bosses are trying to ruin us!’ It was terrible; there was a near riot. The gentleman sat behind locked doors, and by lunchtime he was nearly out of his mind; toward evening he summoned those cunning Jews and told them, ‘Take your money, you damned curs, but give me back my seal!’ The Jews now refused. ‘How can we possibly do so? The whole town has lost a full day’s trade: now we need fifty thousand from Your Excellency.’ So you can see how bad it had gotten. The Jews threatened, ‘If you don’t give us fifty thousand now, tomorrow it will cost an extra twenty-five thousand.’ The gentleman didn’t sleep that night; in the morning he sent for the Jews, gave them back all the money he’d had from them and wrote a promissory note for another twenty-five thousand. Then he carried out an inspection of sorts: of course, he discovered nothing, and he hurried back to his wife, in a state of panic, not knowing where he’d find twenty-five thousand to redeem the promissory note he’d given the Jews. ‘We’ll have to sell the village that came with your dowry,’ he said. She retorted, ‘Not for all the tea in China: I’m very attached to it.’ He told her, ‘It’s all your fault; you got some Old Believers to pray for me to have this mission, you assured me that their angel would help me, and now look at the help I got.’ She responded, ‘It’s your fault, in fact. Why were you such a fool; why didn’t you arrest those Jews and declare that they’d stolen your seal? Anyway, it doesn’t matter: just do as I say and I’ll put things right. Others will pay for your thoughtlessness.’ All of a sudden, she barked out sharply to the nearest listener, ‘Be lively about it, cross the Dnieper and bring me the Old Believer elder.’ Well, naturally, her errand boy went and brought back our Pimen. The lady didn’t beat around the bush: she told him straight, ‘Listen, I know you’re a clever man and you’ll understand what I need. My husband has had a slightly unpleasant encounter, some scoundrels have fleeced him . . . Jews . . . you understand, and we must get hold of twenty-five thousand rubles without delay, and I have absolutely no way of getting that quickly. But I’ve asked you here and I’m no longer worried, because Old Believers are clever and rich people and God helps you, as I have seen for myself, in every way, so give me twenty-five thousand, please, and I for my part will tell all the ladies about your miracle-working icons, and you’ll see how much money you’ll get for wax and lamp oil.’ Gentlemen, you can easily imagine, can’t you, what our knave felt like at this turn of events. I don’t know what words he used, but I believe him when he said that he swore strong oaths that we were far too poor to come up with such a sum. But she was another Herodias: she wouldn’t hear of such a thing. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I know for certain that dissenters are rich men and twenty-five thousand is loose change for you. When my father worked in Moscow, the Old Believers gave him loans, and bigger ones too, several times: twenty-five thousand is nothing by comparison.’ Of course Pimen tried to explain to her that Moscow Old Believers were people with capital, whereas we were simple laborers, God’s husbandmen, so how could we compete with Muscovites in spending power? But she must have learned her trade in Moscow; she floored him with one blow: ‘Why are you telling me all this? Do you think I don’t know how many miracle-working icons you have,

and didn't you yourself tell me how much money you get sent from all over Russia for wax and icon oil? No, I won't hear any more: get me the money at once, or else my husband goes to the governor and tells him how you pray and lead people astray, and things will go badly for you.'

"Poor Pimen nearly fell off the porch; when he got home, as I said earlier, the only word he could say was 'nothing,' but he had turned all red, as if he were straight out of the bathhouse, and he paced from corner to corner, blowing his nose. Well, Luka Kirilov questioned him and finally found out a little of what had happened, but Pimen, of course, wouldn't reveal everything—he just said, 'The lady demands that I get her a loan of five thousand.' That was enough, naturally, for Luka to go for him. 'You rogue. Why did you have to rub shoulders with them and even bring them here? Are we such rich people for us to have that much in savings? And why should we hand it over? Where are they, anyway? Whoever's responsible for this mess can clear it up: there's no way we'll put up five thousand.' After that, Luka Kirilov went off to work; he came back, as I told you, as pale as someone sentenced to death, because after experiencing the events of the night, he foresaw that this would bring down something nasty on our heads. Meanwhile, Pimen went off in a different direction: we could all see him in his boat rowing out of the reeds and crossing over to the city. Now that Mikhailitsa had told me the whole story of how he begged and pleaded for just five thousand, I guessed that he had probably made an attempt to placate the lady. As I was considering all this, standing next to Mikhailitsa, I wondered if it might have bad consequences for us, and whether we should take action to counter the evil that might ensue. Suddenly I saw that it was now too late for action, because a large boat had tied up on the shore, and I heard right behind my shoulders the sound of many voices; I turned around and saw a group of various officials wearing various uniforms, and a large number of gendarmes and soldiers. Gentlemen, before Mikhailitsa and I could blink, they'd all pushed past us and invaded Luka's room; they placed two sentries with sabers drawn at the door. Mikhailitsa began to rush at the sentries, not so much to make them let her pass as it was to intimidate them. Of course they pushed her away; she threw herself even more violently at them, and the struggle ended with one gendarme giving her such a painful blow that she rolled head over heels off the porch. I was about to run onto the bridge to fetch Luka, but I saw that he was now running to meet me, followed by our entire company. They were all furious, bringing whatever tools they had been working with: some a crowbar, some a pickax; they were all running to protect their sacred icons . . . Not all of them could fit into the boat, and they had no other way of reaching the shore, so some jumped straight off the bridge in their work clothes and were swimming, one after the other, in the cold river waters . . . You wouldn't believe our horror at how it all might end. About twenty armed guards had arrived, and although they were dressed for battle, there were more than fifty of us, all inspired by our exultant, ardent faith, all swimming across the water like little seals. It didn't matter if they were clubbed on the head, they were still making for the shore and their sacred icons. Suddenly, though they were soaking wet, they moved ahead, a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God."

8

"Now, you will recall that while Mikhailitsa and I were talking on the porch, Granddad Maroi was in the main room, praying: that was where the officials and their posse found him. Afterward he told us that the moment they came in, they bolted the door and made straight for the icons. Some of them put out the icon lamps, others tore the icons off the wall and laid them on the floor. They shouted at Maroi, 'Are you a priest?' and he answered, 'No, I'm not.' Then they asked, 'Who's your priest, then?' and he answered, 'We don't have a priest.' They said, 'How can you not have a priest! How dare you say you don't have a priest!' Maroi then tried to explain to them that we didn't, but as he couldn't talk properly and mumbled his words, they couldn't make sense of things and just ordered, 'Tie him up, arrest him.' Maroi let them tie him up, not bothered when a peasant constable tied his hands with the end of a piece of rope: he stood there, accepting everything for his faith, waiting to see what would happen next. Meanwhile, the officials had lit candles and were sealing the icons: one attached seals, others recorded them, others made holes in the icons with an awl and then threaded them like so many saucepans onto an iron rod. Maroi watched all this sacrilegious lawlessness without batting an eyelid, since he considered that God had probably consented to such savagery. But then Uncle Maroi heard first one and then a second gendarme cry out: the door burst open and our seals, as wet as when they climbed out of the water, rushed into the room. Fortunately, Luka Kirilov was in the lead, and he immediately shouted, 'Stop, Christian people, no violence!' He turned to the officials and pointed to the icons they had threaded onto an iron rod. 'Why are you, our lords and masters, damaging sacred objects like this? If you

have the right to take them from us, we won't resist lawful authority: take them! But why on earth damage valuable Russian works of art?'

"The husband of the lady who was Pimen's acquaintance was the man in charge: he yelled at Uncle Luka, 'Shut up, scoundrel! How dare you argue?'

"Luka was a proud man, but he controlled himself and quietly responded, 'Let me speak, Your Noble Excellency, we know how things are done. We have in this room one hundred and fifty icons: why don't you accept three rubles per icon and take them, but don't damage our forefathers' handiwork.'

"The chief man's eye flashed and he yelled loudly, 'Clear off!' Then he added in a whisper, 'Give me a hundred rubles per icon, or else I'll roast the lot of them.'

"Luka couldn't even imagine giving such an enormous sum; he said, 'There's no point talking to you, in that case: destroy the lot if you want to; we don't have that kind of money.'

"The chief lost his temper and shrieked, 'You bearded billy goat, how dare you mention money to me?' Then he started bustling about and he gathered every divine representation he could find into bundles, put nuts on the ends of the threaded rods, and sealed them so that it would be impossible to remove or substitute any of them. When everything had been piled up, ready to go, they prepared to leave for good. The soldiers shouldered the bundles of icons strung on metal rods and carried them to the boats, while Mikhailitsa, who had also burst into the room with the other people, furtively removed the icon of the angel from the lectern, covered it with a head scarf, and took it to her room. But her hands were trembling, and she dropped it. Heavens alive, the fuss the chief made: he called us thieves and criminals, saying, 'Aha, you crooks were trying to steal it and keep it off the bolts; well, since it can't be put onto the rods now, this is what I'll do to it!' He took the soot-stained sealing stick, which was dripping with boiling hot pitch and fire, and thrust it straight into the angel's face.

"Gentlemen, don't hold it against me if I can't describe to you what happened when the chief poured a stream of boiling pitch onto the angel's face; that vicious man did worse—he held the icon high, boasting that he had found a way to upset us. All I remember is that the radiant divine face was red and sealed, and a tiny portion of the linseed-oil varnish melted under the burning pitch and came to the surface, and flowed down in two streams, like tears mingled with blood . . .

"We all gasped, put our hands over our eyes, fell to the ground, and groaned as if we were being tortured. Our yells and cries went on so long that even when night fell we were still groaning and lamenting our sealed angel. It was then, in this darkness and stillness, on the ruins of our forefathers' sacred iconostasis, that the thought occurred to us to track down where our guardian angel had been hidden. We swore an oath to steal it back even if we had to risk our lives, and remove the seal. I and a young man called Levonti were chosen to carry out this vow. Levonti was still a mere boy, no more than seventeen, but he was very well built, he had a good heart, he had respected God since infancy, and he was obedient and even tempered, which made him as good as a silver-bridled lively white horse. You couldn't have found a better fellow conspirator and collaborator for such a dangerous mission as tracking down and purloining the sealed angel, the sight of whose blinded face was for us unendurable, to the point of making us mortally ill."

9

"I won't bother you with the details: along with my fellow conspirator and collaborator, I went through the eye of a needle and found out everything. I'll tell you first of the grief that overcame us when we learned that our icons, which had been drilled by the officials and threaded onto rods like chunks of bread, had been dumped in the cellar of the ecclesiastical court: that was something irrecoverable, as good as coffined and buried; there was no point thinking about them. It was good, however, to hear that the bishop himself disapproved of such savage measures and, in fact, asked, 'What was the purpose of this?' He even interceded for these ancient works of art, saying, 'These are antiquities that should be looked after!' But what was worse was that right on the heels of the disaster caused by such disrespect, a new and even worse disaster was caused by this admirer. The bishop himself, we must assume, took possession of our sealed angel with good intentions and spent some time examining it, then averted his eyes and said, 'What disfigurement! How horribly it's been defaced! Don't put this icon in the cellar, put it in the window behind the Eucharist table on my altar.' The bishop's servants did as he ordered, and I have to tell you that, on the one hand, we were very pleased that a member of the church hierarchy was being so considerate, but, on the other hand, we saw that any plan to steal back our angel was now hopeless. There was still another way: we could bribe the bishop's servants and, with their help, exchange the icon for a copy cunningly forged for such occasions. We Old Believers had done this

successfully before, but first we would need to find an icon painter with the experience and skill to create an exact replica icon; we saw no likelihood of finding such a painter in this region. We were all now afflicted with an intense anguish, it was like an attack of dropsy under the skin; in the main room only songs of praise used to be heard, but now loud lamenting filled the room and in a very short time we cried and lamented so much that we were exhausted, and our eyes were so full of tears that we couldn't see the ground beneath our feet. That may or may not be the reason why we suffered a disease of the eyes, which infected everyone. What had never happened before had now befallen us: we had countless numbers of sick people. The belief spread among all the workers that this was no ordinary infection but was sent down by the Old Believers' angel. People said, 'The angel was blinded by the sealing process, so now we're all going to go blind.' Not only we but all the Orthodox churchgoers were agitated by this interpretation, and however many doctors the English bosses brought to see us, nobody would consult them or take medicine: we only cried out, 'Bring us the sealed angel, we want to pray to him; he alone can heal us.'

"The Englishman Yakov Yakovlevich realized what was happening: he went to see the bishop and told him, 'Whichever way you see this, Your Grace, faith is of great importance, so let each believer receive according to his faith: let us have the sealed angel and take it across the river.'

"But His Grace would not accept this. He said, 'This is something that can't be condoned.'

"At the time we felt that his pronouncement was harsh: we spared no words disparaging the bishop. But later it was revealed to us that all this was inspired not by harshness but by divine providence.

"Meanwhile the ominous augurs seemed to continue undiminished, and on the other side of the river the finger of retribution pointed to the person responsible for all our troubles, Pimen, who after the raid fled us and joined the official Orthodox Church. Once I met him in the city; he greeted me, so I greeted him too. He said, 'Brother Mark, I was a sinner, because I have fallen out with you in faith.'

"I told him, 'It is up to God to say who should be in what faith: of course, you did wrong to sell a pauper to buy yourself boots, so forgive me if, as the prophet Amos exhorts us, I rebuke you as a brother.'

"When he heard the prophet mentioned, he trembled. 'Don't talk to me of prophets,' he said. 'I remember the Scriptures and I can feel that "the prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth": I have even been given a sign.' He complained to me that he had bathed in the river not long before and a rash had spread all over his body; he unbuttoned his shirt and showed me, in fact, a rash that reached from his chest to his neck and made him look like a dappled horse.

"Sinner that I am, it was on the tip of my tongue to say 'God marks the villain,' but I bit my tongue and instead said, 'Well, you must pray, and be happy that you have been marked out while you're still on this earth: perhaps you will be untainted when you pass over to the next world.'

"He wept and complained how unhappy he was about it and what he would lose if the rash spread to his face, because the governor himself, when he saw Pimen rejoining the official church, had apparently been pleased that he was so handsome and told the city mayor to be sure to put Pimen to the fore with a silver dish whenever important persons visited the city. But how could you show off a man with a rash? However, why should I listen to this Belial vanity and nonsense of his? I turned and walked away.

"That is how we parted. His distinguishing mark became more and more obvious, and we had other signs: the last came in late autumn when the river froze, and then there was a sudden thaw, which threw the ice up everywhere and skewed and bent everything we'd built: the damage continued until one of the granite piers was washed away and the raging waters swallowed up everything we had erected over many years, at the cost of many thousands of rubles . . .

"Even our English bosses were aghast, so one of them had a word with his superior, Yakov Yakovlevich, saying that if they wanted to be free of all this, they would have to dismiss us Old Believers; but Yakov Yakovlevich was a kindhearted man and wouldn't hear of it. On the contrary, he called for me and Luka Kirilov and asked, 'Men, advise me: Is there any way I can help and make things better for you?'

"We replied that while the face of the angel, so sacred to us, which we took with us everywhere, remained sealed with fiery pitch, nothing could console us, and we were fading away with misery.

" 'Then what do you think you can do?' he asked.

" 'We think that eventually we'll substitute another icon for it and then unseal its pure face, which the godless official's hand has scorched.'

" 'But why is it so precious to you? Can't you get hold of another one just like it?'

" 'It's precious to us,' we replied, 'because it has kept us safe, and we can't get another like it, because it was painted by a virtuous hand in times when faith was firm, and it was consecrated by a priest of the old rites, using the unabbreviated prayer book of Piotr Mogila: nowadays there are no old-rite priests or

proper prayer books.'

"'How are you going to unseal it, when its whole face has been burned out by sealing wax?'

"'Your Honor needn't worry about that,' we replied. 'We only need to get our hands on it, and our guardian angel will look after himself: he wasn't painted by commercial artists; he is a genuine Stroganov work, and the linseed varnish on Stroganov or Kostroma icons is boiled in such a way that it isn't afraid of burning brands and won't let pitch affect its soft ocher pigments.'

"'Are you sure of that?'

"'We are, sir. That varnish is as strong as the old Russian faith.'

"Yakov Yakovlevich then cursed whoever it was who neglected such works of art, shook our hands, and assured us again, 'Don't be downcast: I'm here to help you, and we'll get your angel back. How long do you need it for?'

"'Not for long,' we said.

"'Fine: I'll say I want to make a fine golden raiment for your sealed angel, and as soon as I'm given it, we'll swap it over. I'll get down to it tomorrow.'

"We thanked him, but warned him, 'Sir, but don't do it tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.'

"'Why's that?'

"We replied, 'Because first we have to have a replacement icon that is as like the original one as two peas in a pod, but nobody can find any painters here or anywhere near who are good enough.'

"'Nonsense,' he said. 'I'll bring an artist from the city; he paints splendid portraits, not just copies.'

"'No, sir,' we answered, 'please don't do that, because first, unwanted rumors might spread if we use a lay artist, and second, an ordinary painter can't undertake this sort of task.'

"The Englishman couldn't believe us, so I stepped forward and explained the difference: lay artists today have the wrong sort of art; they use oil paints but we use soft ocher paints dissolved in egg whites; they smear their paint on, so it looks natural only at a distance; but we paint in layers of fluid, which makes for clarity even very close-up. In any case, a lay artist can't even copy an image, because he's been taught to represent the bodily contents of an earthly, indulgent man, whereas sacred Russian iconography represents the heavenly type of face, something that a pleasure-seeking man cannot even imagine properly.

"The Englishman was intrigued by this. He asked, 'But where can you find the master artists who still understand this special sort of art?'

"'They're very rare nowadays,' I informed him (and at that time such artists lived in strict seclusion). 'In Mstera village there is one, Khokhlov, but he's a very old man now and can't be asked to travel far; in Palekh there are two men, but they are unlikely to come either, and, in any case, artists from Mstera or Palekh are of no use to us.'

"'Why would that be?'

"'Because,' I replied, 'their style is wrong. Mstera artists draw the heads too large and their colors are blurred, and Palekh artists use a turquoise color that makes everything bluish.'

"'Then what are we going to do?'

"'I don't know, myself,' I said. 'I've heard that there's still a good artist in Moscow, Silachiov, and he's well known to our people all over Russia, but he's much better at doing Novgorod or the old Moscow styles, while our icon is a Stroganov work, which uses the lightest and brightest paints, so the only suitable artist for us is Sevastian, who lives downriver, but he's a passionate wanderer; he travels on foot all over Russia, doing restoration work for Old Believers, and nobody knows even where to start looking.'

"The Englishman relished all my explanations; he smiled and then replied, 'You are rather extraordinary people; it's such a pleasure listening to you talking about all the things you know so much about, and you are even knowledgeable about art.'

"'Sir, why shouldn't we,' I asked, 'be knowledgeable about art? This is godly art, and we have art lovers who are the simplest of peasants, yet know all the schools and how, for example, they differ in their painting techniques—Ustiug or Novgorod, Moscow or Vologda, Siberian or Stroganov—and they even distinguish, without mistakes, the Russian craft of the famous old masters of one particular school.'

"'Is that possible?'

"'It's just the same,' I replied, 'as your telling one person's handwriting from another's: our people can see at a glance who did the painting—Kuzma, Andrei, or Prokofi.'

"'What are the distinguishing marks?'

"'There's a difference in the technique of rendering the design, both in applying the paint and in the parts left white, in the thickened parts of the face and in the folds of the garments.'

"He listened while I told him what I knew about the Ushakov school of icon painting, the Rubliov school, and the ancient Russian artist Paramshin, who crafted icons that our pious tsars and princes gave

children as a blessing and which, in their wills, they instructed their children to guard like the apple of their eye. The Englishman immediately took out his notebook and asked me to repeat the name of the artist and where his works might be seen. I replied, ‘Don’t even try to look for them, sir; there’s not a trace of them anywhere.’

“ ‘What happened to them?’

“ ‘I don’t know: the wood was used to make pipes, or the icons given to foreigners in exchange for tobacco.’

“ ‘That’s not possible!’

“ ‘Quite the contrary,’ I replied, ‘it’s nothing unusual, and there are examples of this: the pope has a folding icon in the Vatican that was painted by our Russian icon painters Andrei, Sergei, and Nikita in the thirteenth century. It’s a miniature with a lot of holy faces, so amazing that, they say, the greatest foreign artists rave about the miraculous workmanship when they look at it.’

“ ‘How did it end up in Rome?’

“ ‘Peter the Great gave it to a foreign monk, who then sold it.’

“The Englishman smiled and became thoughtful; then he said quietly that, apparently, in England every picture is kept from one generation to the next, as a way of showing who belonged where in whose family tree. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘we certainly have a different education: the connection between our forefathers’ traditions has been broken, so that everything might look newborn, as if the entire Russian race were hatched out only yesterday by a broody hen in the nettles.’

“ ‘But if you have this educated boorishness,’ he said, ‘in which love of family has still been preserved, then why do you not make an effort to preserve your innate artistry?’

“ ‘My dear sir, we have nobody,’ I replied, ‘who can maintain it for us, because everywhere in the modern art schools a corruption of feeling has been encouraged and people’s minds are in thrall to vain things. The model of exalted inspiration has been lost, and everything is grounded in earthly things and imbued with earthly passions. Our modern artists began by portraying the militant archangel Michael based on the features of Potemkin of Tauris, and things have gotten so bad that Christ the Savior is painted as a Jew. What else can you expect of such people? God knows what the uncircumcised in heart and ears may yet portray and tell us to consider to be a divinity: after all, bulls and red onions were worshipped as gods in Egypt. But nowadays we don’t worship alien gods and won’t accept a Jew’s face as the Savior’s, but even these portraits, however cleverly painted they may be, we regard as works of shameless ignorance, and we turn our backs on them, for we have our forefathers’ traditional words, “Distraction of the eyes ruins a pure man’s reason, as a damaged fountain spoils the water.” ’

“That was all I had to say; I fell silent. The Englishman said, ‘Go on: I like your way of thinking.’ I replied, ‘I’ve said everything I had to say.’ He said, ‘No, tell me something else: What do you understand by “inspired portrayal”?’

“The question, gentlemen, was rather difficult for a simple man, but I had no choice but to begin telling him how a starry sky was painted in Novgorod, and then I began expounding about the portrayal in the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kiev, where seven winged archangels, none of them like Potemkin, needless to say, are on either side of the Lord God Sabaoth, while on the threshold of the tent stand the prophets and the forefathers; one step lower is Moses with the tablets; lower still is Aaron wearing a miter and carrying the blossoming rod; on other stages are King David crowned, the prophet Isaiah with his scroll, Ezekiel with the closed gate, Daniel with the stone, surrounded by spectators who point out the path to heaven and show the gifts through which men may reach this glorious path. These include a book with seven seals, the gift of wisdom; a seven-lamp candlestick, the gift of reason; seven eyes, the gift of counsel; seven trumpets, the gift of firmness; a right hand among seven stars, the gift of vision; seven lamps of fire, the gift of reverence; seven thunders, the gift of the fear of God. ‘That representation,’ I said, ‘is hallowing!’

“Mishearing me, the Englishman asked in turn, ‘Forgive me, my dear man: I don’t understand you: Why do you consider it harrowing?’

“ ‘Hallowing, because such a portrayal clearly demonstrates to the soul that a Christian must pray and thirst if he is to rise up from the earth to God’s ineffable glory.’

“ ‘But that’s something which anyone can understand through Scripture and prayers.’

“ ‘Not at all,’ I responded. ‘Not everyone can understand Scripture, and someone who misunderstands can err badly in his prayers: a man may hear the proclamation “of great and rich mercy” and conclude that it’s about money, so that he makes his bows out of greed. But when he sees in front of him a representation of heavenly glory, he thinks of the loftier prospect of life and understands how to achieve that goal, because in icons everything is simple and easily understood: if a man first prays for his soul to feel fear of God, that soul will right away be relieved and move from stage to stage, and with each step it

takes will acquire a surplus of exalted gifts, and then both money and all earthly fame will seem to a man, when he is praying, no more than an abomination in the sight of God.'

"At this point the Englishman stood up and joked, 'And what do you crackpots ask for when you pray?'

" 'We pray for a Christian end to our lives and to answer well at the Last Judgment.'

"He smiled and suddenly drew a green curtain with a pull on a golden cord: behind the curtain, his wife, the Englishwoman, was sitting in an armchair, knitting by the light of a candle. She was a fine lady, very welcoming, and although she didn't speak much Russian, she understood everything and, I expect, she wanted to hear our conversation with her husband. And would you believe it? As soon as the curtain was drawn, she got up, trembling a little, and the dear woman came up to me and Luka, stretched out both hands to us peasants; there were tears in her eyes as she shook our hands and said, 'Good people, good Russian people!'

"When we heard those kind words, Luka and I kissed both her hands, and she touched our peasant foreheads with her lips."

The storyteller paused, covered his eyes with his sleeve, gently wiped them, and whispered, "A touching woman!" Then he pulled himself together and went on with his story.

"After these affectionate gestures, this Englishwoman began telling her husband something in their language, which we didn't understand, but we could tell by her voice that she was asking for something on our behalf. You could see the Englishman liked his wife's kindness: he looked at her, radiating with pride, he kept patting her head, cooing in English like a dove, 'Good, good!' or whatever the English word is; in any case, you could see he was praising her and confirming something. Then he went to his desk, took out two hundred-ruble notes and said, 'Luka, here's some money for you: go and search as you think best for the skilled icon painter you need, have him do what you need, and have him do an icon like one of yours for my wife, because she wants to give one to our son: it's my wife who's giving you this money for all your trouble and expenses.'

"She smiled through her tears and gabbled, 'No, no, no: it's him, I'm separate,' at which she slipped through the door and came back with a third hundred-ruble note. 'My husband gave it to me to buy a dress, but I don't want a dress, so I'm donating it to you.'

"Naturally, we tried to refuse, but she wouldn't hear of it and ran off. The Englishman said, 'Don't dare refuse; take what she's offering.' Then he turned away, saying, 'Off you go, crackpots: away with you!'

"We weren't in the least offended, of course, by this dismissal: although the Englishman had turned away from us, we could see he'd done so to hide his own emotions. So, gentlemen, you see that our own fellow countrymen had wronged us, but English people had consoled us and roused our spirit to action, just as if we had undergone the washing of regeneration!

"Here, gentlemen, begins the second half of my tale. I'll give you just a brief account of how I took my silver-bridled Levonti and went in search of an icon painter, all the places we walked to, the people we saw, the new wonders that were revealed to us, and how, finally, we found what we had lost, and what we came back with."

10

"The most important choice a traveler makes is the choice of a companion: cold and hunger are easier to endure if you have a clever and kind comrade, and I was granted that comfort in the form of the wonderful boy Levonti. We set off on foot, with a backpack and a sufficient sum of money; to protect ourselves and our money we took an old broad-handled short sword, which we always had ready in case of danger. We traveled in the guise of traders, inventing, when we had to, reasons for our route, but always, naturally, on the lookout for our own interests. Early on we visited both Klintsy[2] and Zlynka,[3] and then went to see a few fellow Old Believers in Oriol, but nothing useful came of these visits. We could not find any good icon painters, so we got as far as Moscow. I can only say, 'Woe to you, Moscow! Woe to you, glorious empress of ancient Russian society! We Old Believers had no consolation from you, either.'

"I say it reluctantly, but I can't be silent about it: we did not encounter in Moscow the spirit we longed for. We discovered that the old laws were no longer based on love of goodness or decency but on stubbornness alone; every day we were more and more convinced of this. Levonti and I began to feel ashamed, for we both saw things offensive to a peaceful follower of the faith. We were, however, too full of shame to say anything to each other.

"Of course we found icon painters in Moscow, and very skilled ones too, but what was the use, when these people all lacked the right spirit our forefathers' traditions speak of? In olden times, pious artists,

when they undertook a sacred work of art, fasted and prayed, and produced the same quality for a high price as for a low price, as respect for a lofty undertaking demands. But these people used black primer for some clients and gold in white oil for others, and not to make a lasting icon but a very short-lived one; they prepared the board with weak chalk-, instead of alabaster-, linseed-and-glue gesso, and they took shortcuts by applying the liquid paint in one go, instead of the old technique of painting four or even five layers of watery paint, a method that gives a wonderful softness you can't get nowadays. Apart from their sloppy workmanship, they've lost their dignity; they boast about being the best and don't hesitate to belittle others. Worse still, they gang up to practice the most cunning deceits, they meet in inns, where they drink spirits and praise their own handiwork with haughty arrogance, yet blaspheme about others' art, calling it 'devils' daubs'; secondhand dealers always hang around them, like sparrows around owls, palming off various antique icons to each other, buying and selling them, substituting them, making counterfeit boards, smoking icons in chimneys, making wormholes in them so that they look old and decrepit; they make copper casts of various folding panels using old hammered originals; they cover them with enamel of the Old Testament kind; they turn basins into baptismal fonts and emboss ancient eagles with plucked feathers on them, then sell them to the gullible and inexperienced for the price of a real Ivan the Terrible font: everything they do is deceit and lies. In short, all these people are as black as Gypsies cheating each other over horses: they do it with sacred icons and they treat them in such a way that you are ashamed on their behalf, and all you can see is sin and debauchery and an insult to the faith. Getting inured to this brazen behavior is one thing, but many Moscow icon lovers are actually enthralled by these dishonest impostures and boast about them: X cheated Y over a Deësis, but Y got his own back over X with a Nicholas and, what's more, foisted a fake Virgin on him in the same underhanded way. And it's all done with envy, and they screw up their courage to compete for God's blessing in pulling the wool over the eyes of the inexperienced and the gullible. Levonti and I, being simple pious countryfolk, found this so unbearable that we were both dispirited and had attacks of anxiety.

"'Surely,' we thought, 'our unfortunate old faith can't have already sunk to this?' We both thought the same way and our hearts grieved the same way, but we didn't speak openly to each other; I merely noticed that my young boy was constantly seeking to be on his own. Once, I looked at him and wondered, 'I hope he's not so upset as to plan something he shouldn't.' I asked him, 'Levonti, you seem to be miserable about something. What is it?'

"He replied, 'No, Uncle, it's nothing: it's just me.'

"'Let's go down Bozheninov Street to the Erevan Inn and see if we can persuade the icon painters. Two of them have said they'd be coming there with some antique icons. I've already bartered[4] one and I want to get one more.'

"Levonti replied, 'No, you go on your own, Uncle; I won't.'

"'Why won't you come too?'

"'I just won't: I don't feel very well just now.'

"Well, on the first two occasions I didn't press the matter, but on the third occasion I urged him again, 'Let's go, dear Levonti, let's go, my boy.'

"He bowed affectionately, but begged me, 'No, dear uncle. Let me stay at home.'

"'What's the matter with you, Levonti? You came as my assistant, but you do nothing but sit at home. Dear boy, you're not much help to me.'

"He responded, 'Well, dear uncle, dear Mark Aleksandrovich, you're the master, but don't make me go somewhere where people eat, drink, and talk improperly about sacrosanct things, or I might succumb to temptation.'

"This was the first time he'd openly spoken of his feelings: I was heartbroken, but did not argue. I left on my own and that evening had a long conversation with two icon painters, who made me appallingly disillusioned. What they did to me was too awful for words. One bartered me an icon for forty rubles, then left, after which the other said, 'Watch out, young man, don't worship that icon.'

"'Why not?'

"He replied, 'Because it's a devil's daub.' So saying, he scratched it with his nail and a layer of paint fell off one corner, and on the primer was painted a devil with a tail! He scraped the painting in another place, and another devil was revealed underneath. 'Lord,' I lamented, 'what does all this mean?'

"'It means that you should buy from me, not him.'

"I now saw quite clearly that they were in the same gang and planned to cheat and humiliate me; abandoning the icon to them, I departed, my eyes full of tears, glorifying God that Levonti, whose faith was in crisis, hadn't seen this. But as I approached our lodgings, I saw there was no light in the windows of the chamber we were renting, but the sound of fine, gentle singing was coming from it. I immediately

recognized Levonti's pleasant voice, singing with such feeling that every word seemed bathed in tears. I entered noiselessly, so that he wouldn't hear, stood by the door, and listened to him singing the Lament of Joseph:

To whom shall I tell my grief,
Whom shall I call on to sob with me?

Those verses, if you happen to know them, are in any case so moving that they are impossible to listen to without emotion; Levonti was singing, as he wept and sobbed, that 'My brothers have sold me!' And he wept and wept, as he sang of seeing his mother's coffin, calling on the earth to howl for his brothers' sin!

"These words are always upsetting to me, especially now that I'd just fled from the fratricidal dealers. The words moved me so strongly that I myself started whimpering, and Levonti, when he heard me, fell silent and called to me, 'Uncle! Uncle!'

" 'What is it, my good young man?'

" 'Do you know who our mother in that song is?'

" 'Rachel,' I replied.

" 'No, in ancient times it was Rachel, but now it has to be understood mystically.'

" 'What do you mean, "mystically"?'

" 'I mean that the word has to be said as a metaphor.'

" 'Be careful, child, aren't you speculating dangerously?'

" 'No,' Levonti replied, 'I can feel in my heart that Christ's crucifixion doesn't mean we should seek him with mind and heart alone.'

"I was even more alarmed by his turn of thought. I said, 'You know what, Levonti, dear boy? Let's get out of Moscow as fast as we can and go to the Nizhny Novgorod region; let's look for the icon painter Sevastian: I've heard he's roaming about there nowadays.'

" 'All right, let's go,' Levonti responded. 'Here in Moscow I suffer badly from low spirits but in Nizhny there are forests, the air is cleaner, and I've heard the monk Pamva lives there: he's a hermit who knows no envy or anger—I'd like to see him.'

" 'The monk Pamva,' I responded sternly, 'serves the ruling church. Why would we want to see him?'

" 'What's wrong with that? The reason I wanted to see him was to understand the grace the ruling church has.'

"I scolded him, 'What grace could it possibly have?' But I sensed that he was more in the right than me, because he thirsted for experience, whereas I rejected whatever I didn't know. But I stubbornly resisted him and uttered the most foolish things. I said, 'Church people look at the heavens not with faith but through Aristotle's gates; they map their route across the seas by the pagan god Remphan:[5] Do you want to be like them, with your eyes fixed on one point?'

"Levonti answered, 'Uncle, you're talking nonsense: there's never been a god named Remphan, and the world was created by divine wisdom alone.'

"That response made me say something even sillier: 'Church people drink coffee!'

" 'What's wrong with that? Coffee is a bean, and King David was given some as a present.'

" 'How do you know all that?' I asked.

" 'I read it in books.'

" 'Well, you should know that not everything is written in books.'

" 'And what,' he asked, 'hasn't been written yet in them?'

" 'What? What's not written?' I myself had no idea what to say, so I just blurted out, 'Church people eat hare, and hare is common and unclean.'

" 'Call not thou common what God hath cleansed: that's a sin.'

" 'How,' I ask, 'can you allow hare meat, when it's unclean, when the hare is built like a donkey, and it's both male and female, and it makes human blood thick and melancholic?'

"Levonti just laughed. 'Go to sleep, Uncle, you're spouting ignorant rubbish.'

"I must admit that I hadn't yet formed a clear idea of what was happening in that blessed youth's soul, but I was very pleased that he didn't want to say any more, for I myself understood that I might say anything in anger. So I fell silent and lay there, just thinking, 'No, he's having these doubts because he's homesick; tomorrow we'll get up and set off, and he'll forget all about it.' But I quietly decided, just in case, that I would walk with him in silence, to show him I was very angry with him.

"But my perverse character lacks the firmness to pretend to be angry; very soon Levonti and I began talking, but not about God, because he was far better read than I was: instead we talked about our surroundings, since we had a pretext in the sight of the enormous dark forests on our route. I was trying hard to forget all about my talk in Moscow with Levonti; I decided to be cautious only on one point, to

avoid running into the hermit monk Pamva whom Levonti was so taken by and about whose inexplicable miracles and exalted life I myself had heard from church people.

" 'But,' I thought to myself, 'there's no need to worry: if I avoid him, he's hardly likely to come across us.'

"Levonti and I walked on peacefully and happily and finally reached our goal; we found out that the icon painter Sevastian was rumored, in fact, to be traveling about in the area, so we went from town to town and village to village in search of him: we were almost on his traces, about to catch up with him, yet we never succeeded. We ran like hounds, doing twenty, even thirty kilometers a day without a rest, yet whenever we arrived we were told, 'He was here, but left only an hour ago.' We rushed off after him, but couldn't catch him!

"Suddenly, during one of these journeys, Levonti and I had an argument. I said, 'We need to turn right,' and he argued, 'Left!' In the end he nearly won the argument, but I insisted on my choice of path. We walked and walked, until finally I saw that I had no idea where we had got to, and there was neither path nor track ahead.

"I told the lad, 'Levonti, let's turn back.'

"He replied, 'No, Uncle, I can't walk any more: I'm exhausted.'

"I was very worried: 'What's wrong, child?'

" 'Can't you see,' he answered, 'I'm shaking with fever?' I saw that he was in fact trembling all over, and his eyes were darting about. How suddenly it all happened, gentlemen! He hadn't complained of anything, he'd been walking cheerfully, and suddenly he sat down on the grass in a copse, laid his head on a rotting tree stump, and said, 'Oh, my head, my head! Oh, my head is burning hot! I can't walk; I can't take another step.' The poor boy slumped to the ground; he was collapsing.

"And evening was falling. I was horribly frightened. While we were waiting to see if he might recover a little, night fell. It was autumn, in a dark, strange place, nothing around but mighty pine and fir trees, like the cedars and junipers of the Bible, and the lad was dying. What could I do? I was in tears and told him, 'Levonti dear, please, force yourself: we might find shelter somewhere.'

"But he let his head droop like a flower scythed down; he raved, as if asleep, 'Don't touch me, Uncle Mark. Don't touch me, and don't be afraid.'

"I replied, 'Really, Levonti, how can I not be afraid in such an utterly remote place?'

"Levonti said, 'He that neither slumbers nor sleeps shall preserve us.'

"I was thinking, 'Lord, what's come over him?' All the same I was so frightened that I began to listen out, and I heard something that seemed to crackle as it moved far off through the forest. 'All merciful Lord,' I thought, 'it must be a wild animal, and any moment it will tear us to pieces.' I didn't alert Levonti, because I could see that his mind had deserted his body and was somewhere ethereal: I just prayed, 'Angel of Christ, watch over us in this terrible hour!' But the crackling was audibly getting closer and closer: at any moment it would be upon us . . . Here, gentlemen, I must confess I was very cowardly: I was so scared that I abandoned Levonti where he lay, sick; I scrambled faster than a squirrel up a tree, drew my sword, and sat on a branch, watching for something to happen, my teeth chattering, like a wolf in a snare . . . My eyes were getting used to the darkness, and suddenly I noticed something emerging from the forest: I couldn't at first make out whether it was a wild beast or a robber. When I looked closely I saw it was neither a beast nor a robber but a very small old man in a monk's cowl; I could even see the hatchet he had stuck into his belt, and the big bundle of firewood on his back. He came out into the clearing, quickly drew a few breaths of air, as if gathering in the breeze from every direction. Then he dropped his bundle on the ground and, as if sensing another human being, went straight to Levonti. He came close, bent down, looked him in the face, took his hand, and said, 'Arise, brother!'

"Can you imagine it? I saw him raise up Levonti and lead him straight to the bundle of wood, load it onto Levonti's back, and tell him, 'Take it and follow me!' And Levonti did so."

11

"Gentlemen, you can imagine how frightened I must have been by such a strange event. Where had that quietly imperious little old man appeared from? How could my Levonti, on the verge of death and unable to lift his head, now be strong enough to carry a bundle of firewood?

"I quickly jumped down from the tree, hung my sword on a piece of rope over my back, and, just in case, broke off a nice solid sapling branch; then I set off and soon caught up with them. I saw the old man walking ahead: he seemed to be exactly as when I first set eyes on him—little, hunched, with beard tufts as white as soap foam on either side of his face. He was followed by Levonti, cheerfully stepping in

his footprints and looking at me. Several times I tried to get him to speak and I touched him, but he paid me no attention: he seemed to be sleepwalking.

"Then I ran alongside the old man and said, 'You're a decent man, aren't you?'

" 'What do you want?' he asked.

" 'Where are you leading us?'

" 'I'm not leading anyone anywhere; it's the Lord who leads everybody.'

"At that point he stopped abruptly. I saw we were facing a low wall and gates, in which there was a small door at which the old man knocked, calling, 'Brother Miron! Hey, Brother Miron!'

"A harsh voice rudely responded from the other side, 'You've turned up in the night again. Spend it in the forest! I'm not letting you in.'

"But the little old man tried again, begging gently, 'Let me in, Brother!'

"The owner of the harsh voice opened the door; I saw it was a man wearing the same cowl as the old man's, but he was grim, sullen, and rude: no sooner had the old man crossed the threshold than he was pushed so hard that he nearly fell down. But he said, 'God save you, Brother, for being so kind.'

" 'Lord,' I thought, 'where have we got to?' Then the thought struck me like a thunderbolt as I realized, 'Merciful Savior! Isn't this Pamva who knows no anger? Then better to meet my death in the virgin forest, or blunder into a bear's or a robber's den, than come under his roof.'

"As soon as he took us into a little hut and lit a yellow wax candle, I guessed that we really were in a forest hermitage: I could hold back no longer, and asked, 'Forgive me, good man, for asking: Is it fitting for my companion and me to stay here where you've brought us?'

"He answered, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and all that dwell therein are blessed: lie down and sleep.'

" 'But let me tell you who we are: we're Old Believers.'

" 'We are all the body of Christ, and members in particular. He will gather all of us up.'

"Then he led us to a corner where he had made a thin reed-matting bed, at the head of which was a round wooden bolster covered with straw. Again he told us both, 'Sleep!'

"Just imagine! My Levonti, like a novitiate monk, obeyed and lay down, while I, still wary, demurred, 'Forgive me, man of God, for asking one more question . . .'

"He replied, 'Why ask? God knows everything.'

" 'No, tell me your name.'

"He responded in an old granny's singsong voice, which didn't suit him at all, 'Call me white or call me black, call me duckie and I'll quack.' After that meaningless utterance, he took his candle and clambered to a tiny cubbyhole, as cramped as a pine coffin. But from outside came another shout from the rude man: 'Don't dare light a flame: you'll burn the cell down. You can pray by the book in the daytime, in the dark just pray by heart!'

" 'I won't, Brother Miron, I won't. God save you!' Then he blew out the candle.

"I whispered, 'Father, who is it who makes such coarse threats to you?'

"He replied, 'It's my servant Miron . . . he's a good man; he keeps an eye on me.'

" 'Now we're stymied,' I thought. 'He is the hermit Pamva! There's nobody so without envy or anger as he is. Now we're in trouble: he's got us in his thrall and will rot us, as gangrene rots fat. Our only hope is to get up early tomorrow, at dawn, snatch Levonti, and run away so he doesn't realize where we've been.' I decided to stay awake and to stick to this plan: to watch out for the first light of day, wake up the youth, and run for it.

"So as to stay awake and not miss dawn, I lay there reciting the Creed, in the old way, as was right. Each time I recited it, I added, 'May this apostolic creed, this catholic creed, this creed, preserve the world,' before beginning again. I don't know how often I recited this Creed to keep myself awake, but it was many times. Meanwhile the little old man was praying in his coffin, and through the cracks in the planks I could see a light and his bows: then I suddenly thought I heard people talking; what about, I could not work out. Levonti seemed to have joined the old monk for a conversation about faith, but instead of words they merely exchanged looks of understanding. This is how I interpreted it for some time: I forgot to recite the Creed and listened to the monk tell the lad, 'Go and cleanse yourself.' Levonti replied, 'I shall.' I can't tell you now whether I dreamed it or not, but after this I slept for a long time; when I finally awoke I saw it was morning, fully light, and the monk who had taken us in, the hermit, was sitting there with a bark sandal on his knee that he was poking at with an awl. I examined him carefully. Oh, how fine he was, how spiritual! An angel seemed to be sitting in front of me, plaiting a bark sandal, as a simple way of manifesting himself on earth. I watched him and saw that he was smiling as he looked at me and said, 'You've slept long enough, Mark: it's time to get down to business.'

"I responded, 'What is my business, O herald of God? Do you know everything?'

“‘I do,’ he said, ‘I do. Does a man ever set out on a long journey without business to attend to? Everyone, brother, is seeking the Lord’s way. May the Lord support and assist such humility!’

“‘How can I be called humble, holy man? You are humble, but my humility is all vanity.’

“He replied, ‘Oh no, brother, I’m not humble: I am overly proud, for I want a part of the kingdom of heaven for myself.’ Suddenly, conscious of his crime, he clasped his hands together and wept like a small child.

“‘O Lord,’ he prayed, ‘be not angry with me for this perversity of will: send me to the depths of hell and order devils to torment me, as I deserve.’

“‘In that case,’ I thought, ‘it’s not him. Thank God, it’s not Pamva the all-seeing hermit; it’s just a deranged elder monk.’ The reason for that conclusion was that nobody in his right mind would renounce the kingdom of heaven and pray for the Lord to send him to be tormented by devils. Never in my life had I heard of anyone wanting such a thing; I thought it was madness, so I ignored the old monk’s weeping, dismissing it as the misery of a devil worshipper. But in the end I wondered why I was lying there when it was time to get up; only I saw the door open, and in came my Levonti, whom I’d completely forgotten about. The moment he entered, he bowed to the monk’s feet and said, ‘Father, I have done everything: now bless me!’

“The monk looked at him and responded, ‘Peace be upon you: rest in God!’

“I saw my lad bow down to the ground once more before leaving the room; the hermit went back to plaiting his bark sandal.

“Then I leaped to my feet, thinking, ‘No, I’ll quickly fetch Levonti and we’ll run away from here without looking back.’ So I went out to the entrance lobby and saw my lad lying on his back on a boarded bench with no headboard: he had crossed his arms over his chest. I didn’t want him to see how alarmed I was, so I asked in a normal voice, ‘You wouldn’t know where I can get a bowl of water to wash my face in, would you?’ Then I whispered to him, ‘I beg you in the name of the living God, let’s get out of here as fast as we can!’

“When I looked more closely, I saw that Levonti wasn’t breathing . . . He’d passed away! He’d died! I howled in a crazed voice, ‘Pamva! Father Pamva, you’ve killed my boy!’

“Pamva came out quietly to the threshold and said joyfully, ‘Our Levonti has flown off!’

“I felt quite vicious. ‘Yes,’ I answered through my tears, ‘he’s flown off. You took his soul, like a dove from its cage.’ I threw myself at the feet of the departed Levonti and wept over him right until evening, when other monks came from the monastery, prepared the body, put it in a coffin, and carried it off, since he had joined the church while I slept like a wastrel.

“I said not another word to Father Pamva. What was there to say? If I swore at him, he’d bless me; if I hit him, he’d bow to the ground: a man of such humility was insuperable. What had he to fear, when he even asked to be sent to hell? No: I had good reason to tremble with fear that he might rot us, as gangrene rots fat. He and his humility could even chase all the devils out of hell or reconcile them with God! They might start tormenting him, but he’d ask them, ‘Torture me worse, because I deserve it.’ No, no! Even Satan couldn’t withstand such humility. He’d thrash him with everything he had, he’d pull out all his fingernails, and then he’d realize how powerless he was against a creator who had created such love, and then he would feel ashamed.

“That is how I decided that the old monk and his sandals were created to harrow hell. Wandering the forest all night, not knowing why I wasn’t getting far, I kept thinking, ‘But how does he pray, with what icons and by what books?’

“I recalled that I hadn’t seen a single icon in his hut, nothing but a cross made of sticks tied together with bast fiber; and I hadn’t seen any big books . . .

“‘Lord,’ I dared to conclude, ‘if there are two people like that in the church, then we’re finished, for this man is inspired entirely by love.’ I kept on thinking about him; just before dawn I began to long for a vision of him, if only for a minute, before I departed. No sooner had this thought occurred to me than I heard once more the same crackling of branches, and Father Pamva emerged once more with his hatchet and bundle of firewood. He said, ‘Why did you take so long? Are you in a hurry to build Babylon?’

“I found that remark very hurtful, and replied, ‘Why do you reproach me, Your Reverence, with such words? I’m not building Babylon and I have nothing to do with the foulness of Babylon.’

“He answered, ‘What is Babylon? A tower of pride: do not take pride in righteousness, or the angel will step back.’

“I said, ‘Father, do you know why I am traveling?’ And I told him all our sorrows. He kept listening and listening, then replied, ‘An angel is quiet, an angel is meek; he wears whatever God orders him to wear; what God indicates, he will do. That’s an angel. He lives in the human soul, which is sealed by false wisdom, but charity will destroy the seal . . .’

“At that point I saw he was departing from me, but I couldn’t take my eyes off him; I was unable to control myself, and I bowed to the ground as he left; when I lifted my head, he was no longer there, or was hidden by the trees, or . . . the Lord knows where he had vanished to.

“I now began to reflect on his words and their meaning: ‘an angel lives in the soul and is sealed, but charity will release him.’ Suddenly I wondered, ‘Suppose he is in fact the angel, and God orders him to appear to me in disguise: then I’ll die, like Levonti!’ After this intuition, I don’t remember how, but I crossed a stream on a log and broke into a run: I covered sixty kilometers without a break, constantly afraid that I might have seen an angel. Suddenly I entered a village, where I found the icon painter Sevastian. He and I discussed and agreed to everything in no time: we would leave the next day. But our discussion was cool, and our journey was even cooler. Why? First, because Sevastian was a man of few words, and second, or mostly, because I was no longer myself: the hermit Pamva had filled my soul, and his lips whispered the words of the prophet Isaiah about God ‘whose breath is in this man’s nostrils.’ ”

12

“The icon painter Sevastian and I covered the return journey quickly; we got back to the building site at night and found everything safe and sound. After we’d seen our people we went right away to see the Englishman Yakov Yakovlevich. He was very inquisitive, immediately wanted to meet the icon painter, and kept looking at his hands and shrugging, because Sevastian had hands as big as rakes, and dark, too, for Sevastian was as swarthy as any Gypsy. Yakov Yakovlevich asked, ‘Amazing, brother. How can you paint with hands that big?’

“Sevastian replied, ‘Why shouldn’t I? What’s unsuitable about my hands?’

“ ‘But they wouldn’t let you draw anything very fine.’

“Sevastian asked why not. The Englishman said, ‘Because your finger joints wouldn’t be flexible enough.’

“Sevastian retorted, ‘That doesn’t matter! Do my fingers decide what I can or cannot do? I’m in charge of them; they are my servants and do as I say.’

“The Englishman smiled. ‘So you can do us a substitute sealed angel?’

“ ‘Why not? I’m not one of those craftsmen who is afraid of a task: it’s the task that’s afraid of me. I’ll make such a good copy you won’t be able to tell it from the original.’

“ ‘All right,’ said Yakov Yakovlevich, ‘we’ll immediately try to get hold of the original icon, and while we’re waiting you can reassure me by demonstrating your skills: paint an icon for my wife in the ancient Russian style, one that she will like.’

“ ‘In the name of which saint?’

“ ‘I wouldn’t know; paint what you think best, she doesn’t mind, as long as she likes it.’

“Sevastian thought about it, then asked, ‘What does your wife mostly pray to God for?’

“ ‘I don’t know, my friend: I don’t know what she prays for, but I suspect it’s likely to be about the children, for the children to grow up as decent people.’

“Sevastian thought again, then replied, ‘All right, sir, I can manage something to suit that taste too.’

“ ‘How will you go about it?’

“ ‘I’ll paint something that is contemplative and will enhance the spirit in which your wife prays.’

“The Englishman ordered that Sevastian be given everything he needed in his own quarters in the tower, but Sevastian wouldn’t work there: he took a seat by the window in the attic above Luka Kirilov’s room and began his commission.

“But, gentlemen, we could never have imagined what he did. As the subject was children, we thought he would paint Roman the Miracle Worker to whom women pray when they are barren, or the slaughter of the infants in Jerusalem, which always comforts a woman who has lost her child, because that includes Rachel weeping for her children, who would not be comforted, because they were not. But this wise icon painter took into consideration that the Englishwoman did have children and she was offering prayers not for children to be granted but for them to live morally; so he painted something quite different, something that suited her aims better. He therefore chose an old, very small board, only eighteen centimeters, and began to work his magic on it. First of all, of course, he primed it with strong Kazan alabaster, because that primer makes a surface as strong and smooth as ivory; then he set out four flat areas, in each of which he marked out an individual small icon, and separated them with borders of gold in linseed oil before starting to paint. The first square depicted the birth of John the Baptist, with eight figures, the newborn child, and chambers; the second showed the birth of the Holy Virgin Mary, six figures, the newborn child, and chambers; the third depicted the nativity of the Savior, the stable, the

manger with the Virgin and Joseph standing by, and the Magi on their knees, as well as Salome the Doubter and every sort of cattle—oxen, sheep, goats, and donkeys —and the cuckoo, a bird forbidden to Jews but which is depicted to show that all things come not from the Jews but from God who created everything. In the fourth square the icon painter portrayed the birth of Nicholas the Wonderworker and the same saint as a child, with chambers and many figures surrounding him. There was so much meaning here, when you beheld those who brought up such good offspring, and there was such art, for none of the figures was bigger than a needle, yet you could see all their vivacity and movement. For example, in the birth of the Virgin, Saint Anne was depicted as in the Greek original, lying on her bed with drummer maidens standing around her, one holding gifts, the others a fan or candles. One woman supports Anne by the shoulders, a mirror shows Joachim watching the chambers, the midwife is washing the holy Mother of God waist-deep in a font; on one side a maiden pours water into the font from a ewer. The chambers were all drawn with the aid of a compass, mineral green above and sandalwood red below: in the lower chamber sat Joachim and Anne on a throne, Anne holding the most holy Mother of God, while all around, between the chambers, were stone pillars, scarlet curtains, and a white-and-ocher fence . . . Sevastian had portrayed all this wonderfully well, he expressed all the contemplation of the divine in every face, even the smallest: he inscribed the title *Fecundity* and handed the icon to the English couple. They looked and began working it out: they said they had never expected anything so imaginative and had never heard of such fine and minute painting, that they couldn't detect the slightest mistake: they gave Sevastian two hundred rubles for the icon, asking him if he could depict things even more minutely.

"Sevastian replied that he could.

" 'Then,' said the Englishman, 'paint my wife's portrait for me on a ring.'

"But Sevastian said, 'No, that's something I can't do.'

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because, first of all, I've never tried that sort of art, and, second, I can't contaminate my own art for its sake, lest I be condemned by my forefathers.'

" 'What nonsense!'

" 'It's not nonsense at all,' he replied. 'We have our forefathers' decree from the good old days, and it's confirmed in the patriarchal charter, which says, "If anyone should prove fit for such a sacred cause as the representation of icons, then an icon painter following such a special way of life may not paint anything except sacred icons." '

"Yakov Yakovlevich asked, 'And if I gave you five hundred rubles for the painting?'

" 'You can promise me five hundred thousand, and you'll still be keeping your money.'

"The Englishman burst into a smile and joked to his wife, 'How do you like that? He considers that painting your face would be degrading for him.' Then he added in English, 'Oh, a good character!' But he finished by telling us, 'Look, brothers, we're now going to see this business through; I can see you have your own rules, so I don't want anything to be omitted or forgotten and thus hinder things.'

"We replied that we didn't foresee any such thing.

" 'Well, see for yourselves,' he said, 'I'm making a start.' And he went to see the bishop with a request that he wanted to show his appreciation by having the garments of the sealed angel gilded and the crown decorated. The bishop's response was neither positive nor negative: he wouldn't forbid it, but nor would he authorize it. But Yakov Yakovlevich gave him no peace, and we were waiting, like gunpowder waits for fire."

13

"Let me remind you, gentlemen, by the way, that a lot of time had passed since the beginning of these events, and it was now Christmas. But don't assume that Christmas there was like Christmas here: time behaves oddly there, so that sometimes Christmas is celebrated in winter fashion, at other times in God knows what fashion—it's rainy and dank; one day there's a light frost, the next it all thaws; the river can be covered with yellowy pancake ice, which then breaks into floes, as it does during the spring floods . . . In short, it is the most changeable of times, and the locals talk not about winter weather but about the slush, which is the right word for it.

"The changeable weather was at its most tiresome in the year my story is about. While I was making my way home with the icon painter I can't begin to tell you how many times those who remained had to switch from winter to summer clothes. This was when our work was at its height, because all seven bridge piers were now ready for the chains to be laid from one bank to the other. The bosses, naturally, were anxious to join up the chains as soon as possible, so that before the spring high waters they could at

least hang a temporary bridge and deliver building materials, but it was not to be. No sooner had they stretched out the chains than such a hard frost struck that there was no question of laying a bridge. So work stopped and the chains hung there with no bridge. But God provided another bridge: the river froze, and our Englishman set off across the ice-covered Dnieper to lobby for our icon; when he returned, he told me and Luka, 'Tomorrow, lads, you can expect me to bring your treasure.'

"Lord, the feelings that went through our minds! At first we wanted to keep it a secret and not tell anyone except the icon painter, but the human heart knows no patience. Instead of observing secrecy, we did the rounds of all our people, knocked on all the windows and whispered to one another. Heaven knows why we ran from hut to hut, it was just as well that it was a beautiful starry night, and the freezing cold made the snow seem strewn with jewels, while Venus blazed in the cloudless sky.

"We spent the night running around joyfully; the next day we were just as full of ecstatic expectancy; in the morning we stayed close to our icon painter, not knowing where to carry his boots, because the hour had come when everything depended on his skills. The moment he told us to hand or fetch him something, ten of us would rush to do it, so enthusiastically that we tripped up one another. Even Granddad Maroi ran about until he caught his foot in something and tore the heel off his shoe. The only calm person was the icon painter; this was not the first time he had undertaken such a task, and he was getting everything he needed ready, without fuss or bother: he dissolved egg white in kvass, inspected his linseed varnish, prepared an alabaster-primed canvas and old boards that matched the size of the icon; he fixed a sharp saw blade, thin as a cord, into a bow of strong wheel-rim wood, and he sat by the window, using his fingers to powder in his palms lumps of ochers he foresaw he would need. Meanwhile we all washed by the stove, put on clean shirts, and stood on the riverbank, looking at the city of refuge from which a radiant guest was to come and visit us, while our hearts either quivered or sank . . .

"Oh, what moments those were, and they lasted from first light right until evening, when we suddenly saw the Englishman's sleigh rushing across the ice from the city, straight toward us . . . A quiver ran through every one of us; we all threw our hats down and prayed, 'God the Father, through the spirit and by Your angel, have mercy on Thy servants!'

"Praying thus, we fell facedown in the snow and in our ardor stretched out our arms: suddenly we heard the Englishman's voice over us: 'Hey, you Old Believers! Look what I've brought!' and he handed us a parcel wrapped in a white kerchief.

"Luka took the parcel and froze: he sensed it was something small and lightweight. He undid a corner of the kerchief and saw that it was just a hammered metal frame torn from our angel, and that the icon itself was missing. We crowded around the Englishman and told him tearfully, 'Your Grace has been tricked: there's no icon here, they've just sent the silver frame from it.'

"But the Englishman was now quite unlike the person he had been hitherto: he was probably fed up with this time-wasting job, and he shouted at us, 'Why do you get things mixed up all the time? It was you who told me that I had to ask for the raiment, and I did; you just don't know what you want!'

"We saw that he was in a huff, so we carefully began to explain that we needed the icon in order to make a copy, but he wasn't listening anymore: he told us to clear off, and the only concession he made was to ask us to send the icon painter to see him. Sevastian went to see him, and was treated in the same ill-tempered way.

" 'Your working people,' the Englishman said, 'don't know what they want: they asked for the raiment, they said that all you needed were the dimensions and an outline drawing; but now they're howling that this is no use to them. I can't do any more for you, because the bishop refuses to hand over the icon. Make a copy of the icon as quickly as you can, cover it with the raiment and let's hand it back, then the secretary can steal the old original for me.'

"But Sevastian, the icon painter, being a rational man, charmed him with soft words: 'No, Your Grace, our people know their business, and we really do need the original icon before we start. People say that we paint using copies and stencils, but only because they want to offend us. Our charter dictates the rules, but the artist is free to interpret them. For instance, the charter says that Saint Zosimas the Anchorite or Saint Jerome has to be painted with a lion, but does this restrict the painter's imagination in portraying the lion? Saint Neophyte of Nicaea is supposed to be painted with a dove; Saint Conon the Gardener has to have a flower; Saint Timothy a small medicine box; Saint George and Saint Savva Stratilatos with spears; Saint Photius with a deacon's vessel; Saint Crotates of Nicomedia with clouds, since he preached to the clouds. But every icon painter is free to depict these subjects in any way his imagination and art allow him. That's why I have no idea how the angel you want to substitute has been painted.'

"The Englishman heard Sevastian out and then dismissed him, as he had us; he took no further decisions, so, gentlemen, we were sitting on the riverbank like pelicans in the wilderness, not knowing

whether to give up all hope or to expect anything else; we no longer dared approach the Englishman, and in any case the weather was as grim as we were: a horrible thaw had set in, and it was raining steadily, so that even in the daytime everything was covered in thick, smoky haze, and the nights were so dark that even Venus, which shines in the firmament throughout December, was hidden and never came out once . . . We were in nothing but a spiritual prison. And Christmas was just as bad: on Christmas Eve there was thunder, a heavy downpour that didn't stop for two days, then a third day; the snow was all washed away into the river, and the river ice turned blue and began breaking into clumps: on the penultimate day of the year it swelled up, broke, and flooded . . . Floe after floe was flung down the turbulent waves, and our building site was swamped by the river: there was a mountain of ice blocks piled high, they banged against one another, making a noise, God forgive me, like howling demons . . . It was unbelievable that the building works could stand up to such unprecedented pressure. Millions of rubles' worth of work could be ruined, but that was not what worried us, because our icon painter, Sevastian, seeing there was nothing for him to do, rebelled, packed up his belongings, and prepared to travel to other parts, and we had no way of stopping him.

"The Englishman, too, had other worries, because during this spell of bad weather something came over him, nearly driving him mad: they said he was constantly going around to see everybody, asking, 'How can I get out of it? How?' Then he suddenly got a grip on himself somehow and summoned Luka: 'You know what, man? Let's go and steal your angel, shall we?'

"Luka said yes. Luka noticed that the Englishman seemed to have a real thirst for dangerous adventure: Yakov Yakovlevich decided that he'd go to the monastery the very next day to see the bishop, that he'd take the icon painter under the guise of a goldsmith and ask to see the icon, so that Sevastian could make a proper copy allegedly just for the raiment; but Sevastian was to study it as closely as he could and then paint a forgery when he got home. Afterward, when a genuine goldsmith had made a raiment, it would be brought to us on our side of the river and Yakov Yakovlevich would make another trip to the monastery and say he wanted to see a solemn Episcopal service, would go to the altar and stand, wearing a greatcoat, by the Eucharist side altar where our icon was kept safely on a windowsill, steal it and hide it in his coattails, then hand his greatcoat over to a servant, saying he was too hot, and ask the servant to take it outside. One of our people would be in the yard behind the church and immediately extract the icon from the greatcoat and rush back to us with it, while the icon painter would use the time taken up by the all-night vigil to remove the old icon from its old board and insert the forgery, then cover it with its raiment and send it back in the same way, so that Yakov Yakovlevich could put it back on the windowsill, as if nothing had ever happened.

" 'Why not, sir? We agree to everything,' we responded.

" 'But watch out: remember that I shall be no better than a thief and I want to be sure that you're not going to give me away.'

"Luka Kirilov replied, 'Yakov Yakovlevich, we're not the sort of people to deceive our benefactors. I'll take the icon and will bring both of them back, the genuine one and the forgery.'

" 'But suppose something stops you?'

" 'What could possibly stop me?'

" 'Suppose you dropped dead, or drowned?'

"Luka wondered how any such obstacle could arise; but he realized that a man digging a well did sometimes hit on buried treasure, while a man going to market might come across a rabid dog. He replied, 'Just in case, sir, I'll leave one of my men by your side, and if anything happens to me he will take all the guilt upon himself and will undergo death, rather than betray you.'

" 'And who is this man you consider so reliable?'

" 'Maroi, the blacksmith,' replied Luka.

" 'He's an old man, isn't he?'

" 'Yes, he's not young.'

" 'But he's stupid, I believe, isn't he?'

" 'We don't need him to be clever; the point is that he has a solid spirit.'

" 'How can a stupid man have a solid spirit?'

" 'Sir, you find that spirit and intelligence are not connected: the wind bloweth where it listeth, and it doesn't matter if some people have long hair and others have very little.'

"The Englishman thought about it: these were interesting sentiments, all the same. 'But how is he going to get me out of it, if I'm caught?'

" 'I'll tell you how,' Luka replied. 'You'll be standing by the window in the church, and Maroi will be outside under the window. If I don't turn up with the icons by the time the service ends, he'll smash the glass and take all the blame on himself.'

“The Englishman very much liked the idea. ‘Curious,’ he said, ‘curious. But why should I trust this stupid man of yours and his spirit to not run away?’

“ ‘Well, that’s a matter of mutual trust.’

“ ‘Mutual trust,’ the Englishman repeated. ‘Hmm, hmm, mutual trust! I go off to do hard labor because of a stupid peasant, or he gets a flogging because of me, is that it? Hmm, hmm! If he keeps his word, he gets a flogging . . . That’s interesting.’

“Maroi was sent for and it was explained what he had to do. He said, ‘Well then?’

“ ‘You won’t run away?’ asked the Englishman.

“Maroi replied, ‘As if I would.’ He said not a word more.

“The Englishman was full of joy: he had livened up. ‘Charming,’ he said, ‘very interesting.’ ”

14

“This conversation resulted in immediate action. The very next morning we rowed the big launch that belonged to the boss and took the Englishman to the city side of the river. Once there, he and the icon painter, Sevastian, got into a carriage and drove to the monastery; just over an hour later we saw our icon painter running up with a sheet onto which he had copied the icon.

“We asked him, ‘Did you see the icon, dear man, and can you manage a forgery now?’

“ ‘I’ve seen it, and I can do the job, only it may come out a bit too lively, but that’s nothing to worry about: when the icon arrives, it will take me just a minute to dull the bright colors.’

“ ‘Master, put all you’ve got into it,’ we beseeched him.

“ ‘Don’t worry, I’ll give it everything I’ve got.’

“As soon as we brought him, he got down to work and by twilight he managed to put on the canvas the spitting image of our sealed angel, except that the colors seemed a little fresher. By evening, the goldsmith had sent the new gold surroundings: they had been ordered in advance, using the gold leaf the Englishman had brought before. Now came the most dangerous hour of our burglary.

“Of course, we had made thorough preparations: we said our prayers before evening fell and waited for the right moment, and as soon as the first monastery bell on the other side of the river tolled the all-night vigil, three of us got into a small boat: myself, Granddad Maroi, and Uncle Luka. Maroi had brought an ax with him, as well as a chisel, a crowbar, and a rope, to make himself look like a thief, and we rowed straight toward the monastery fence.

“At that time of the year, evening falls early, of course, and despite the full moon, it was a pitch-dark night, a real thieves’ night.

“Once we’d crossed, Maroi and Luka left me in the boat, which was tied to a small birch tree, while they crept toward the monastery. I pulled up the oars and laid them in the boat, and waited impatiently, so that the instant Luka set foot in the boat we could push off. Worrying about the outcome, whether we’d manage to conceal our theft before vespers and the all-night vigil were over, made time pass horribly slowly. I was thinking that whole ages had passed, it was terribly dark, a wind was blowing, and the rain had turned to sleet; the boat began to toss in the wind and I, wicked and slothful servant that I am, was wrapped in my cloak, trying to keep warm: I began to doze off, when suddenly the boat was jolted and rocked. I woke up with a jerk and saw Uncle Luka standing there; he ordered me in a strangled voice, quite unlike his own, ‘Row!’

“I picked up the oars, but was so frightened I couldn’t get them into the oarlocks. I finally forced them in and pushed off from the riverbank. I asked, ‘Uncle, did you get the angel?’

“ ‘I’ve got it here; row harder!’

“ ‘Tell me,’ I insisted, ‘how you got it.’

“ ‘We got it without trouble, as we said we would.’

“ ‘Will we get it back in time?’

“ ‘We should: they’ve only got as far as singing the great introductory anthem. Row! Where are you rowing to?’

“I looked around: oh Lord! In fact, I was rowing in the wrong direction: it looked right; I was rowing across the current, but our settlement was out of sight, because my eyes were blinded by the wind and the snow; all around me was a roaring sound and rocking waves, while the river surface seemed to be a sea of ice. But by God’s grace we reached our goal: both of us leaped out of the boat and set off at a run. The icon painter was ready and waiting; he acted with firmness and coolness; first he took hold of the icon and, as the people kneeled and bowed to it, he let everyone in turn make the sign of the cross and then kiss the sealed face, while he looked at it and at his forgery.

“He said, ‘It’s good. All that’s needed is dulling down with a little bit of dirt and saffron.’ Then he took the icon by its edges and clamped it in a vise; he had fixed his saw into a tight hoop shape and . . . the saw began to dash to and fro! We were all standing there, afraid the icon would be damaged. It was frightening, sir! You can imagine: after all, those great big hands of his were shaving off the board a layer no thicker than a sheet of fine writing paper . . . One slip and it would have been disastrous: if he’d misjudged the saw’s bite by a hair’s thickness, he would have ripped into the face and come through to the surface. But the icon painter Sevastian executed the whole procedure with such cool artistry that you only had to look at him to feel every minute more and more confident. And he managed to saw off the painting, which couldn’t have been thinner; next, it took him only an instant to cut the sawn-off icon away from the edges, which he then glued back to the original board. The forged icon, however, he crumpled with his hands and fist, then banged it on the edge of the table, then rubbed it between his palms, so that he seemed to be trying to tear and destroy it; finally, he lifted his canvas up to the light: this new copy was now so thoroughly cracked that it looked like a sieve . . . Sevastian then glued it onto the old board, between the edges, and took a handful of some muddy-looking powdered paint of his own, used his fingers to mix it with old linseed oil and saffron into a paste, and rubbed it as hard as he could with his palm into this crumpled copy . . . He did all this very energetically, and the newly painted icon became utterly antique, exactly like the original. Then he quickly varnished the icon with linseed oil, and others among us began putting on the frame, while the icon painter fitted the real icon that he’d sawn free into a wooden case he’d prepared earlier. He then demanded a piece of lamb’s-wool felt from a hat.

“Now began the hardest part: removing the seal. The icon painter was handed a lamb’s-wool hat; he put it on his knee, ripped it apart, then covered the sealed icon with a piece. He shouted, ‘Give me a red-hot iron!’

“A heavy tailor’s iron had been heated up in the stove, to his orders. Mikhailitsa hooked the iron out and put it on a shovel; Sevastian wrapped his hand in a rag, spat on the iron and then dashed it against the piece of lamb’s wool! Just one stroke of the iron made the lamb’s-wool felt give out an evil stench, but the icon painter gave it another stroke and then rubbed the iron against the felt, pulling it off instantly. His hand flew like lightning, there was now a pillar of smoke from the felt hat but, undaunted, Sevastian went on roasting it; with one hand, he turned the felt a little, and managed the iron with the other. Each time he pressed slower and harder. Suddenly he threw aside both iron and felt and lifted the icon to the light: the seal might never have been there. The strong Stroganov linseed varnish had survived, but the sealing wax was erased, leaving just what looked like a tiny fiery-red dewdrop on the face, and the divine radiance of the face was wholly revealed . . .

“Now some prayed and some wept, others tried to kiss the icon painter’s hand; Luka Kirilov did not forget what he had to do. Valuing every minute, he handed the icon painter his fake icon and said, ‘Well, finish the job quickly!’

“Sevastian, however, replied, ‘My job is done; I’ve done everything I undertook to do.’

“ ‘How about putting a seal on it?’

“ ‘Where?’

“ ‘Here, on the new angel’s face, like the seal on the old one.’

“Sevastian shook his head. ‘No, I’m not an official: I won’t do something so sacrilegious.’

“ ‘Then what are we to do?’

“ ‘I can’t tell you. You should have found an official or a foreigner, but you forgot to get hold of any busybodies, so do it yourself now.’

“Luka said, ‘How can you say that? We’d never do anything so sacrilegious.’

“ ‘Nor would I,’ responded the icon painter.

“In the middle of this brief confusion, Yakov Yakovlevich’s wife flew into the house: deathly pale, she asked, ‘Surely you must have finished by now!’

“We told her we had and we hadn’t: we’d done the most important thing, but we couldn’t do the unimportant one.

“She babbled in her broken language, ‘What are you waiting for? Can’t you hear what’s going on outside?’

“We listened hard and became even paler than her: we’d been too preoccupied to pay any attention to the weather, and now we heard a roar: the ice was moving! When I leaped out I saw that the ice was a solid mass forcing its way the width of the river, like a rabid animal, floe bumping into floe, jumping onto one another, roaring and breaking up.

“Without a thought, I rushed to the boats: not one was left: they’d all been swept away . . . My tongue sagged in my mouth like a rag, I couldn’t force it to utter a sound; my chest sank until rib touched rib, I felt the earth was swallowing me . . . I stood there, motionless and mute.

“But while we were rushing about in the dark, the Englishwoman, left alone in the house with Mikhailitsa, learned the reason for the delay: she grabbed the icon and a minute later leaped out onto the porch with a lantern, shouting, ‘Here you are: it’s finished.’

“We looked: there was a seal on the new angel!

“Luka immediately put both icons under his shirt and shouted, ‘A boat!’

“I told him there were no boats, they’d been swept away. The ice, I’m telling you, was like a herd of horses, piling up, smashing against the bridge’s icebreaker piers, shaking the bridge so badly that in some places you could hear the clanging of the chains, though they were easily as thick as floorboards.

“When she realized what had happened, the Englishwoman clasped her hands and shrieked in a voice that was no longer human, ‘James!’ Then she fell down, lifeless.

“We stood there, all feeling the same: ‘What about our promise? What will become of the Englishman now? What will become of Granddad Maroi?’

“The bell in the monastery bell tower began tolling for the third time. Uncle Luka suddenly came to life and exclaimed to the Englishwoman, ‘Wake up, madam, your husband won’t be harmed: the worst that can happen is our old Maroi’s decrepit skin will be flayed by the executioner and his honest face will be dishonored by branding, but that can only happen over my dead body!’ With these words he made the sign of the cross, stepped forward, and left.

“I shrieked, ‘Uncle Luka, where are you going? Levonti died, and so will you!’ I rushed out to stop him, but he picked up an oar lying by his feet, the one I had thrown down when we got back, then threatened to hit me with it, shouting, ‘Get away, or I’ll kill you!’

“Gentleman, I’ve admitted often enough in telling you all this how lily-livered I was when I abandoned the late Levonti on the ground and clambered up a tree myself, but honestly I tell you that I wouldn’t have feared the oar and I wouldn’t have backed away from Luka, but . . . believe it or not, no sooner had I recalled the name of Levonti, than the image of the youth Levonti took shape in the darkness and raised its arm menacingly. That was too terrifying for me: I retreated in disarray, by which time Luka was standing on one end of the chain; once he’d found his footing, he called through the storm, ‘Start chanting the festive hymn to the Virgin.’

“Our choirmaster, Aref, was there: he obeyed instantly, starting with the chant ‘I shall open my lips.’ The rest of us joined in, and we recited the chant as loud as we could, in the face of the storm, while Luka, regardless of fear and mortal danger, was crossing over the bridge chain. It took him a minute to cross one span and to start descending the next one . . . After that? After that he became invisible, swallowed up by darkness. Was he still crossing, or had he now fallen to be dashed away by the accursed ice floes into the seething waters? We didn’t know whether to pray for his salvation or to weep in prayer for the peace of his unshakable and honorable soul.”

15

“But what was happening, meanwhile, on the other side of the river? The reverend bishop was reaching the end of the all-night vigil that he was holding in the main church: he knew nothing about the theft from the side altar during the service. Our Englishman Yakov Yakovlevich, with the bishop’s permission, stood by the side altar, concealed our angel, and sent it out of the church, as he had meant to, wrapped in his greatcoat. Luka had rushed off with it, while Granddad Maroi kept his word and stayed right under the window outside, waiting until the last minute, if Luka failed to return, for the Englishman to retreat, after which Maroi would smash the window and break into the church with his crowbar and chisel, like a real thief. The Englishman didn’t take his eyes off Maroi: he could see Maroi was following orders, and whenever he noticed the Englishman turning his face to the window to catch sight of him, Maroi nodded to indicate that he, the thief who’d claim responsibility, was there.

“That was how the two of them showed each other what decent people they were, neither letting the other surpass him in mutual faith. But these two acts of faith were about to be joined by a third one, yet they still didn’t know what this third act of faith would achieve. When the last bells tolled for the all-night vigil, however, the Englishman opened the skylight ajar, to let Maroi in, himself preparing to stand back. Then he suddenly saw Maroi turn away from him, looking elsewhere: Maroi was staring over the river and repeating the phrase, ‘God bring him across! God bring him across! God bring him across!’ Then he suddenly he jumped into the air and danced about like a drunkard, shouting, ‘God has brought him across, God has brought him across!’

“Yakov Yakovlevich was in the depths of despair; he thought, ‘Well, that’s it: the old idiot has gone mad, and I’m doomed.’ But when he looked, Maroi and Luka were embracing.

“Maroi mumbled, ‘I watched over you crossing the chains with your lanterns.’

“Uncle Luka responded, ‘I didn’t have any lanterns.’

“ ‘Where did the lighting come from?’

“ ‘I don’t know, I didn’t see any; I just ran and ran, and I don’t know how I ran across without falling . . . someone seemed to be supporting me by both arms.’

“Maroi said, ‘That was the angels: I saw them, so now I shan’t make it after midday: I shall die today.’

“But Luka didn’t have time for long conversations: he didn’t answer Maroi. He handed the Englishman the two icons through the skylight. The Englishman took them and showed them back to Luka. ‘What? There’s no seal?’

“ ‘What do you mean, there isn’t?’

“ ‘There isn’t.’

“Naturally, Luka crossed himself and said, ‘It’s all over. We don’t have time to put it right. That’s a miracle performed by the church angel, and I know why.’

“Immediately Luka rushed into the church, pushed his way through to the altar where the bishop was being disrobed, fell at his feet, and said, among other things, ‘I am a blasphemer and a thief: this is what I’ve done. Have me put in chains and sent to prison.’

“The bishop lived up to his dignified rank, heard Luka out, and responded, ‘Now this should be a lesson to you as to whose faith is more effective. You used deceit to remove the angel, but our angel removed its own seal by itself and brought you here.’

“Luka answered, ‘I can see, Your Grace, and I shake with fear. You should now order me to be sent for a flogging.’

“But the bishop responded with the words of absolution: ‘By the power given to me by God, I forgive and absolve you, child. Prepare to receive the pure body of Christ this morning.’

“Well, gentlemen, I don’t think there’s any need to tell you any more. In the morning Luka and Maroi returned and said, ‘Fathers and brothers, we have seen the glory of the angel of the governing church and all the divine concern for it in the generosity of its bishop, and we have anointed ourselves with consecrated oil and today at matins have taken Communion with the flesh and blood of the Savior.’

“In any case, ever since I stayed with the old monk Pamva, I had long felt the urge to be one in soul and spirit with all holy Russia: I exclaimed, ‘We’re with you, Uncle Luka!’ Like a single flock of lambs under one shepherd, we all gathered around, and it was perhaps only then that we understood where and to what end our sealed angel had been leading us on, first blazing a trail and then removing his seal for the sake of brotherly love, which became manifest that terrible night.”

16

The narrator had finished his story. The listeners were silent for a while; eventually one of them cleared his throat and remarked that everything in the story made sense—Mikhailitsa’s dreams; the vision she saw when she slept; the angel falling, thanks to a cat or dog running in and knocking it to the floor; Levonti’s death, since he had been ill even before he met Pamva. All the chance coincidences in the words of Pamva’s riddles also made sense.

“I can even understand,” the listener added, “that Luka crossed the chain using an oar: stonemasons are famous for being able to walk and climb anywhere, and the oar was a balancing stick; I can also understand that Maroi might have seen lightning around Luka and taken it to be angels. When a man is freezing to death and under terrible tension, what might he not imagine? I might even have accepted Maroi, as he predicted, dying before midday that day.”

“But, sir, he did die,” said Mark.

“Excellent! There is nothing surprising about an eighty-year-old man dying after such anxieties and getting chilled; but what makes no sense at all to me is how the seal that the Englishwoman put on the new angel could have disappeared.”

“Well, that’s very easily explained,” Mark responded cheerfully, telling us that shortly afterward they had found the seal between the icon and its raiment.

“How could that have happened?”

“It happened because the Englishwoman, too, thought it was a crime to spoil the angel’s face, so she put the seal on a piece of paper and slipped it under the edge of the frame . . . It was done very cleverly and skillfully, but when Luka was carrying the icon it moved about under his shirt and that made the seal drop out.”

“Ah, well, now the whole story is simple and natural.”

“Yes, that’s what a lot of people suppose: that it all happened in the most ordinary way; not just educated gentlemen who know all the details, but our brothers, who have stayed in the schism and laugh at us, say that the Englishwoman sneaked us back into the church on a piece of paper. We don’t argue with such insinuations; people can judge according to their beliefs: we don’t care what paths the Lord uses to find a man and what vessel He gives us to drink from, so long as He has found us and quenched our thirst for unity of spirit with His fatherly protection. But those ruffians, the carters outside, are coming out from under the snow. You can see the good fellows have had a rest: they’ll be off soon. Maybe they’ll give me a lift. New Year’s Eve has passed. I’ve taken up a lot of your time and talked too much about myself at times. But let me wish you a Happy New Year, and, for the sake of Jesus Christ, forgive my ignorance.”

1872
Translated by Donald Rayfield

THE ENCHANTED WANDERER

1

WE WERE crossing Lake Ladoga from Konevets Island to Valaam; on the way the ship had to call at Korela Harbor. Many of us were interested enough to disembark; we were taken in lively Finnish pony traps to the deserted township. Shortly afterward, the captain was ready to continue our journey, and we sailed off again.

After visiting Korela it was only too natural for people to start talking about this impoverished but extraordinarily Russian old settlement, sadder than any place you could ever imagine. Everyone on the boat shared this view. One of the passengers, a man who liked making philosophical generalizations and political jokes, remarked that he was quite unable to understand why it was thought appropriate to send Petersburg's undesirables to fairly remote places, which cost the treasury so much money just in transportation, when right here on the shores of Lake Ladoga, so close to the capital, there were ideal places like Korela, where no freethinking or radicalism could hold out against the locals' apathy and the appalling boredom of the scenery, so depressing and impoverished.

"I'm sure," said this traveler, "this must all be due to fixed habits of thinking or, at the very least, a lack of proper information."

Someone else, who had traveled a lot in this region, replied that there had occasionally been exiles who lived here, but none had been able to endure it for very long.

"One young man, a student priest, was sent here as a sexton for being rude (that's a kind of exile I've never understood). Anyway, for some time after he arrived, he put a good face on it and kept hoping to appeal successfully; but later he took to drink and drank so much that he lost his mind and sent a petition saying he would be better off if he was 'shot, or conscripted into the army, or hanged for inadequacy' as soon as possible."

"What was the official response to that?"

"Mmm . . . I . . . don't know, actually; but anyway he didn't wait to hear the response: he hanged himself."

"Quite right," responded the philosopher.

"Quite right?" the storyteller, evidently a trader, but also a serious and religious man, queried him.

"What else could he do? At least he died and that was the end of that."

"What do you mean 'the end of that,' sir? What was going to happen to him in the next world? Suicides spend all eternity in agony. They can't even be prayed for."

The philosopher smiled a venomous smile and said nothing, but a new opponent came forward to contradict both him and the trader, and unexpectedly stood up for the sexton who had executed himself without official authorization.

This man was a new passenger whom nobody had noticed embarking at Konevets. Until now he had been silent and no one had paid him any attention, but now everyone turned to look at him: they were probably amazed that he had passed unnoticed all this time. He was an enormous man; his face was swarthy and frank; his thick, long, curly graying hair had an unusual pewter-colored sheen. He was wearing a novice monk's robe, with a wide monastic belt and a tall black broadcloth cowl. Either he was a novice or a proper monk: it was impossible to tell, because monks on the Ladoga islands don't wear cylindrical kamilavkion hats when they travel or on the islands themselves—in their rural simplicity they are content to wear a cowl. Our new fellow passenger was to turn out to be extraordinarily interesting: he looked as if he were just over fifty, but he was in every sense of the term a warrior hero, in fact, a typical, straightforward, kindly Russian hero who reminded you of good old Ilya of Murom in Vereshchagin's fine picture and in Count A. K. Tolstoy's poem.[1] He looked as if he should be wearing birch-bark sandals as he rode a "dappled" horse, lazily sniffing at a "dark pine forest that smells of pitch and strawberries," not walking about in a cassock.

But for all his kindly, simplehearted appearance, you didn't have to be very observant to notice that he was a man who had seen a lot and was, as they say, "a man of the world." His stance was bold and confident, but there was no disagreeable overfamiliarity about him, and when he spoke, he did so in a pleasant but authoritative low voice.

"None of that matters at all," he began in a soft, unhurried way, enouncing one word after another through his thick gray mustache, which twirled upward like a hussar's. "I can't accept what you say about suicides in the next world, about them never being forgiven. And it's nonsense to say that there is

nobody to pray for them, because there is a man who can very easily, with no trouble, get them out of their predicament."

He was asked who this man was, with the knowledge and ability to help suicides after their death.

"I'll tell you who, sir," replied the warrior in a black cassock. "There's a little village priest in the bishopric of Moscow, a hopeless drunk who was once nearly defrocked: he's the one who deals with them."

"How do you know about this?"

"Come on, sir, everyone in the Moscow district knows about this, not just me, because this was overseen personally by the Most Reverend Metropolitan Bishop Filaret."

There was a brief silence, then someone said that this was all somewhat dubious.

The man in a black cassock was not at all offended by the remark. He replied, "Indeed, sir, at first sight it does seem dubious. And why shouldn't we find it suspicious, when even His Reverence found it unbelievable for some time, and only after he was given convincing proofs did he see that it was impossible not to believe it, and so he did?"

The passengers pestered the monk; they begged him to tell them this astounding story; he consented, and began as follows:

"The story goes that a bishop's inspector once wrote a letter to the metropolitan bishop, saying that in fact this little priest drank wine and was unfit to have a parish. Actually, the denunciation, in essence, was right and proper. So the metropolitan bishop ordered the priest to be brought to Moscow to see him. It took one look for the metropolitan bishop to see that the priest really was a hopeless drunk, so he decided to have him dismissed. The little priest was very upset: he even stopped drinking. He kept lamenting and wailing, as he thought, 'How low I've sunk! What can I do now, except put an end to myself? That's the only choice left to me: at least the bishop will then feel sorry for my unfortunate family and find someone to marry my daughter, take my place, and provide for my family.' Fine, then. So he made a firm decision to kill himself and set a day for it, but he was a kindly soul and it occurred to him: 'It's all very well, but suppose I do die; I'm not a dumb beast, after all. I have a soul, and what will happen to it?' Now he felt even more desolate. Well then: he goes on feeling desolate, while the bishop resolves to dismiss him for drunkenness. One day, after dinner, the bishop lies down on his divan to relax with a book and falls asleep. Well, the bishop fell asleep, or was just dozing off, when he suddenly dreamed that the doors of his cell were opening. He shouted out, 'Who's there?'—he thought his servant might have come to announce a visitor. But when he looked, he saw it was not the servant but an old monk, very amiable and friendly, coming in. The bishop immediately recognized him as Saint Sergius.

"So the bishop asks, 'Is that you, Blessed Father Sergius?'

"The saint replies, 'It's me, O Filaret, servant of God.'

"The bishop asks, 'What does your purity require of my unworthiness?'

"Saint Sergius replies, 'I want an act of mercy.'

" 'To whom do you order me to show it?'

"The saint named the little priest dismissed for drunkenness, and then left. The bishop woke up and thought, 'What should I make of this? An ordinary dream, a fantasy, or a spiritual vision?' He became very pensive and, being a man widely renowned for his intellect, he decided that this was just an ordinary dream, for it was hardly likely that Saint Sergius, who observed all the fasts and led a good and strict life, would plead for a priest who was so weak and careless of his soul. Well, gentlemen: that was the metropolitan bishop's reasoning, so he left matters to take their course as they'd begun, and spent the rest of his day on his duties, before going to bed at the proper time. But no sooner had he lain down than he had another vision, one that troubled his great spirit even more. Try to imagine it: a rumbling and a roar so terrible that words cannot describe it . . . Galloping knights, too many to count . . . charging toward him, all dressed in green, with armor and feathers, and their black horses are like lions, the horde led by a proud commander wearing the same uniform, and they all follow the commander when he waves his dark banner with a dragon on it. The bishop didn't know where this regiment was heading, but its proud leader was ordering, 'Tear them to pieces now that they have nobody to pray for them!' The commander galloped on, followed by his warriors, and after them came dreary ghosts, emaciated, like a flock of geese in spring. The ghosts nodded sadly and pathetically at the bishop, groaning all the time, as they wept, 'Forgive him! He's the only one who prays for us.' As soon as the bishop arose, he sent for the drunken priest and questioned him about how and for whom he prayed. Faced with the bishop, the priest's heart sank: he was lost for words, and said, 'Your Worship, I do as I'm supposed to.' But the bishop made him admit the truth. 'Sorry,' said the priest, 'I am guilty of one thing: as I am weak of spirit myself, and as I have been so desperate that I thought I would be better off killing myself, so when I prepare the Eucharist, I pray for those who have died without contrition and who have laid hands on

themselves . . .' Well, the bishop now understood his vision of those ghosts passing over him like emaciated geese, and he refused to give any joy to the demons racing ahead to destroy them, so he blessed the little priest, pronouncing, 'Go and sin no more, but pray for those you have been praying for.' Then he sent the priest back to his parish. That is how a man like this priest can always do good for those too weak to endure life's battles, because now he won't go back on his boldness, he'll go on pestering the Creator for them, and God will have to forgive them."

"Why does He *have* to?"

"Because 'Knock and it shall be opened to you': after all, it was God Himself who told us this, so there'll be no change there, sir."

"Tell me, please, apart from this Moscow priest, is there really nobody who prays for suicides?"

"I honestly don't know how to answer you. They say it's wrong to ask God to help them, since they took the law into their own hands, but, all the same, some people do pray for them, because they don't understand this. I think, though, anyone can pray for them on Trinity Sunday, or maybe All Saints' Day: that's when you have special prayers. Wonderful prayers, full of feeling: I think I'd never tire of hearing them."

"Can't these prayers be said on other days?"

"I don't know, sir. You'd have to ask someone learned: I imagine he would know. But it's never been a concern of mine, so I've never found myself discussing it."

"But when you've attended mass, haven't you noticed these prayers being repeated at times?"

"No, sir, I haven't: but don't take too much notice of what I say, because I don't often attend services."

"Why's that?"

"My work doesn't allow me to."

"Are you a priest monk or a priest deacon?"

"Neither: I'm still a senior novice."

"But doesn't that mean that you're a monk?"

"Mmm . . . well, yes; that's what people think."

"They may think that," retorted the trader, "but a novice in a cassock can still get his head shaved and be conscripted."

The warrior hero in a black cassock was not in the least offended by this remark: he merely thought for a minute and then replied, "Yes, he can, and they say there have been cases of this happening; but I'm too old, I'm fifty-two, and military service is nothing new to me."

"Have you really served in the army?"

"I have, sir."

"How's that, were you one of those warrant officers?" the trader asked him.

"No, I wasn't."

"Then who are you: a soldier, a quartermaster, or an axle greaser?"

"No, you've guessed wrong: I am a real military man, all the same, and I've been with the regiment almost since I was a child."

"So you're a conscripted orphan, a *cantonist*?" the trader persisted angrily.

"Wrong again."

"God knows who you are; then who are you?"

"I'm a *connoisseur*."

"Wha-a-t's tha-a-at?"

"I'm a connoisseur, sir, a connoisseur, or to use a more popular term, a horse expert, and it was my job to advise the army remount officers."

"So that's it."

"Indeed, sir. I've selected and broken in several thousand horses. I've trained real beasts, the sort that can rear up on their hind legs and then plunge down with all their strength and smash in a rider's chest with the saddletree, but no horse could ever do that to me."

"But how did you tame horses like that?"

"Me? Very simply, because I have a special natural gift. I would leap onto them, not give the horse time to understand what was happening, and grab its ear with my left hand and pull its head to one side with all my might, and punch its head right between the ears with my right fist, and make a terrible rasping noise with my teeth, so that some horses even pass bits of brain and blood through their nostrils: that tames them."

"And then?"

"Then you get down, stroke it, let it have a thorough look at you, so it has a good image of you, then you get on again and off you ride."

"Is the horse a good ride after that?"

"It is indeed, and it's obedient, because horses are clever, they have a sense for whoever is dealing with them and what he thinks of them. As for me, in that respect every horse loved me and responded to me. There was a horse in the manège in Moscow that defied everyone who tried to ride it; the cunning devil had learned a way of biting its rider's knees. This demon would grab a knee with its great big teeth and crack the kneecap open like a pea pod. A lot of people were killed that way. The Englishman John Rarey came to Moscow around then—he was known as 'the mad tamer'—and that horrible horse nearly ate his knees, too. In any case, it made him lose face. The only reason he was unharmed was, they say, that he had a steel kneecap, so even though it tried to eat his knee, it couldn't get its teeth in and just threw him off. Otherwise he'd have been a dead man. But I taught that horse a proper lesson."

"Please tell us, how did you manage to do that?"

"With God's help, sir, because as I told you, I have the gift for it. Mr. Rarey, the so-called 'mad tamer,' and other people who tried to handle that horse kept it on a tight rein. Their only technique to deal with its viciousness was to not let it twist its head to either side. But I worked out a completely different technique. The moment the Englishman Rarey gave up on the horse, I said, 'It's all right, it couldn't be easier, because all that's wrong with the horse is that it's possessed by a devil. The Englishman will never understand that, but I can and I'll cure it.' The officers agreed. Then I told them, 'Take it out to the Dorogomilovo city gate!' They led it out. Well, sir: we led it by the reins to the gully by Fili, where the gentry have their summer cottages. I could see this was a suitable open space, and made a start. I mounted that cannibal—I was bare-chested and barefoot, wearing just trousers and a cap, and around my bare body a tarpaulin belt with a saying by the brave Saint Prince Vsevolod Gavriil of Novgorod, whose bravery I've always revered and believed in: 'I'll never surrender my honor to anyone.' I didn't have any special tools with me, except for two: in one hand, a strong Tatar whip with a lead weight weighing at most two pounds at the tip, and in the other hand, an ordinary glazed clay pot of thin slurry. Well, sir, I got into the saddle, with four men holding the reins and pulling the horse's head in different directions to stop it getting its teeth into any of them. That devil saw we'd ganged up on him; he was neighing and shrieking and sweating, shaking all over with fury, doing his best to eat me. I could see all that; I told the stablemen, 'Quick as you can, pull the bridle off the bastard.' They couldn't believe their ears when I gave the order: they just stared with amazement. I said, 'Don't just stand there! Didn't you hear me? You've got to do as I say immediately!' They answered, 'Ivan Severianych!' (I was a layperson then and was called Mr. Ivan Severianych Fliagin.) 'How can you possibly order the bridle to be taken off?' I was getting angry with them: I could see and feel in my legs that the horse was in a furious rage, so I squeezed it hard with my knees and I yelled at them, 'Take it off!' They were about to say something, but now I was out of my mind with anger and I had only to gnash my teeth noisily for them to tug the bridle off and then run off wherever their eyes took them. The very same moment I did to the horse what it least expected: I smashed the clay pot over his head; the pot broke and the slurry poured out into his eyes and nostrils. He took fright; he had no idea what had happened. Then, with my left hand, I quickly snatched my cap off my head, used it to rub even more slurry into his eyes and gave him a crack of the whip over the flank . . . He jerked forward, and I kept rubbing his eyes with my cap so as to blur his vision completely, while I whipped him on the other flank as well . . . I kept on thrashing him and I didn't stop. I wouldn't let him draw a breath or take a look at anything, I kept smearing slurry over his head so that it blinded him, I made him shake all over by noisily gnashing my teeth, I frightened him, and I flogged both his flanks, so he realized I wasn't joking . . . He finally understood and got to the point where he stopped resisting and broke into a gallop. He was a fine horse, he let me ride him and carried me off, while I thrashed and thrashed him, so that the harder he galloped, the harder I went for him with my whip, and finally all this effort began to tire us out; my shoulder was aching and I couldn't lift my arm any more, while he had stopped veering his head about. His tongue was poking out of his mouth. Well, now I saw he was saying sorry, so I got off as fast as I could, wiped his eyes clean, took him by his forelock, and told him, 'Kneel, you dog meat, kennel food!' And I jerked him down, and he fell to his knees in front of me, and after that he became such a docile animal that you couldn't have asked for better: he let people mount and ride him; only he soon dropped dead."

"So he dropped dead, did he?"

"He did, sir; he was a very proud creature; he curbed his behavior, but I don't think he could curb his character. When Mr. Rarey heard about this, he invited me to work for him."

"Well then, did you work for him?"

"No, sir."

"Whyever not?"

"How can I put it? Firstly, I was a connoisseur, after all, and that was the type of work I was most used

to—selecting, not breaking. But all he wanted me for was for taming mad horses. And secondly, I reckon this was just a cunning ruse on his part."

"What do you mean?"

"He wanted to get my secret out of me."

"Would you have sold it to him?"

"Yes, I would have."

"So what was stopping you?"

"Well . . . I must have frightened him."

"Tell us, for heaven's sake, the story behind that."

"There's no particular story, sir: he just said, 'Pal, tell me your secret, and I'll give you a lot of money and take you on as my connoisseur.' As I've never been able to deceive anyone, my answer was: 'What secret? It's just silliness.' But he always looked at things from his learned English point of view, and he wouldn't believe me. He said, 'Well, if you're not willing, in your normal state, to let me into the secret, let's have some rum to drink.' After that the two of us drank an awful lot of rum, until he went all red and put it as best he could: 'All right, now tell me what you did with the horse.' I answered, 'It was this . . .' and gave him as terrifying a look as I could and gnashed my teeth noisily but, since I didn't have a pot of slurry at the time, I raised my arm with the glass in it, as though I was about to smash it on his head. When he saw that, he ducked down and dived under the table; then he dashed for the door and got away, nowhere to be found. So we never met again."

"Is that why you didn't go to work for him?"

"Yes, sir. How could I work for him when he was afraid of even meeting me after that? I would have very much liked to work for him, because I took a great liking to him when we were seeing who could drink the most rum, but it seems you can't alter your destiny, and I had to follow my other vocation."

"So what do you consider your vocation to be?"

"Really, I don't know how to put it . . . I've been through a lot of things, I've found myself in the saddle and under the hooves, I've been a hostage, I've done military service, I've knocked people around myself, and I've been badly beaten, so hard that anyone else might have gone under."

"But when did you join the monastery?"

"That was quite recently, sir, just a few years after my previous life."

"And did you feel you had a vocation for that, too?"

"Mmm . . . I don't know how to explain it . . . But I suppose that I must have."

"Why put it like that, as if you're not sure of what you're saying?"

"The reason is this: How can I say for certain, when I can't even get a grip on all the extent of the life I've lived?"

"Why is that?"

"It's because I did a lot of things against my own will."

"Whose will, then?"

"My parents': they made a vow."

"Then what happened to you because of your parents' vow?"

"I've spent my whole life in mortal peril, but I've never managed to perish."

"Can that really be so?"

"That's how it's been, sir."

"Then tell us, please, the story of your life."

"Why not? I can, if you like, tell you what I remember, but I can only do it if I start at the very beginning."

"We'd appreciate that. That will make it even more interesting."

"Well, I wouldn't know if it's going to be of any interest, but listen, if you like."

2

Mr. Ivan Severianych Fliagin, the former connoisseur, began his story:

"I was born a serf; my family were house serfs owned by Count Komarovsky in Oriol Province. The new generation of masters have squandered the estates, but when the old count was alive, those estates were very substantial. In the village of Gorodishche, where the count lived, there was an enormous manor house, an annex for visitors, a theater, a special bowling alley, kennels; live bears sat on a pillar, there were gardens, he had his own choristers to sing and actors to put on all sorts of performances. He had his own weavers and ran all sorts of craft workshops, but his main attention was focused on his

horse stud. Particular people were assigned to every job, but the equine side of things was given even more special attention, and just as the military used to turn conscripts' children into future warriors like their fathers, who were cantonists (conscripted orphans), so we had coachmen to produce coachmen's boys as drivers, and stablemen to produce stable boys to look after the horses, and peasants growing forage to produce foragers to bring hay from the barns to the paddocks. My father, Severian, was a coachman; he wasn't one of the top coachmen, because we had a great number of them, but he could drive a team of six horses, and when the Tsar passed our way he was number seven and was rewarded with an old-fashioned blue five-ruble note. My mother died when I was a baby, so I don't remember her: I was a prayed-for son, which means that she hadn't had a child for a long time and begged God to give me to her, and when God granted her wish, she died straight after giving birth, because I came into the world with an unusually large head. That's why they called me Bighead, instead of Ivan Fliagin. I lived with my father in the coachmen's yard, so I spent all my life in the stables, and that's where I discovered the secret of how to know an animal and, you can say, learned to love horses, because even when I was a baby, before I learned to walk, I used to crawl between the horses' legs and they didn't hurt me. And when I grew a bit older, I became really close to them. Our stud was separate from the stables; we stable boys were kept away from the stud, and we were given already reared colts and fillies to train. Every one of our coachmen and postilions drove six-horse carriages: the horses were of every breed—Vyatka, Kazan, Kalmyk, Bitiuga, Don—all of them horses we bought at horse fairs. Of course, we had more horses from the stud, but they aren't worth talking about, since studhorses are always biddable and don't have much character; they don't have any spirited imagination, whereas those wild horses were terrible beasts. The count used to buy whole herds of them, and I mean a whole herd, cheap, eight or ten rubles a head, and as soon as we'd driven them home we'd start to school them. They put up a terrible fight. Half of them would actually drop dead sometimes, but they refused to be trained: they'd stand in the yard, staring at everything and shy even at a wall; all they did was cast a glance at the sky, as if they were birds. Sometimes, when you watched, you even felt sorry for them, because you could see that the poor animal would fly away if only it had wings . . . At first they wouldn't touch oats or water from a trough, they wouldn't eat at all, just shriveling up until they were mere skin and bones and dropped dead. Sometimes we would lose more than half of what we'd bought, especially the Kyrgyz horses. They're terribly fond of the freedom of the steppes. On the other hand, though, there were some horses that accepted the bridle and decided to live, but you had to cripple quite a few of those when you trained them, because the only way to deal with their wild nature is to be strict. The horses that could stand all this training and teaching would turn out so fine that no studhorse could compare with them for their riding virtues.

"My father, Severian Ivanych, drove a team of six Kyrgyz horses, and when I was old enough, I was made postilion to this team. The horses were nasty, not like today's cavalry horses chosen for officers. We called those officers' horses tea-and-coffee butlers, because riding them gave you no pleasure at all, since even officers could sit on them, but the Kyrgyz were simply wild beasts, snakes, and demons all combined. Their faces alone were bad enough, the way they bared their teeth, their great big legs, or their manes . . . sheer horror is the word for it. They didn't know what tiredness was: going a hundred or a hundred and fifteen kilometers from our village to Oriol or back home at the same pace, with no rest, was nothing to them. Once they were in full gallop you had to watch out, or they'd fly right past where you wanted to stop. But I was only eleven years old when I started riding the horse saddled for the postilion, and I already had what was considered the right kind of voice for a postilion: a voice that penetrated, rang out, and was so sustained that I could call out 'Dddidi-i-i-ttt-i-o-o' and not stop for half an hour; but my body wasn't yet as strong as my voice, so I couldn't easily ride for great distances. So they tied me to the horse, winding around all the straps to attach me to the saddle and its girth so that I couldn't fall off. I felt I was being bruised to death by bouncing up and down in the saddle, and there were even times when I got so weak that I fainted, but I still kept on riding upright, and when I'd had enough of being tossed about, I would recover my senses. It wasn't easy work: on a journey you'd have such changes happening so often that you were either exhausted or you felt all right, but when you got home you would be barely alive when they took you off the saddle, laid you down, and gave you horseradish to sniff. But I got used to it eventually and sometimes I'd even feel like lashing a passing peasant's shirt with my whip. That's a typical postilion's trick. Once we were driving the count to visit someone. It was a fine summer day, the count and his dog were in an open carriage, my father was driving a team of four, and I was on the lead horse galloping ahead. Our route meant leaving the main highway and taking a particular turn, onto a side road for about fifteen kilometers, leading to a monastery called the Baptist's Pit hermitage. The monks made this road so people would want to visit them. As you'd expect, the state road was full of rubbish and willow roots, thick stems sticking out, while

the monks' road to the hermitage was swept and kept clean, lined with the birches they had planted; the birches were green and scented, and in the distance the fields stretched out . . . In a word, it was so good that I just longed to cry out, but, of course, you mustn't shout out when there's nobody to make way, so I stopped myself and kept up the gallop. We were only three or four kilometers from the monastery, coming down a long slope, when I suddenly spotted a tiny dot ahead . . . something like a hedgehog creeping along the road. I was glad of this excuse and at the top of my voice I yelled out 'Dddd-i-i-ttt-i-o-o,' so I could be heard a kilometer away, and I got so worked up that when we started to catch up with the two-horse hay cart that I was shouting at, I stood up in the stirrups and saw a man lying on top of the hay; it must have been nice for him to be warming himself in the sun and fresh breeze, for he was fast asleep and completely unafraid, stretching his back with pleasure, even flinging his arms out, as if he were embracing the cart. I could see that he wasn't going to move for me, so I veered to one side and when I was level with him I stood up in the stirrups, gnashed my teeth for the very first time, and with all my might I lashed his back with my whip. His horses darted down the hill, and he suddenly jerked his body up: he was an old man, dressed as I am today in a novice monk's cowl, and his face was as pitiful as an old woman's; he was frightened to death, he was weeping, and he was writhing on the hay like a gudgeon on a frying pan; he was probably too sleepy to work out where the edge was and he tumbled off the cart and under the wheels, and then he crawled around in the dust—he'd caught his feet in the reins. My father and I, and the count too, thought the monk tumbling over was funny at first, but I could see that the horses had come to a standstill down by the bridge, with a wheel of the cart caught against a pillar, while the monk wasn't getting up or even turning over . . . We drove up and I could see he was covered all over with gray dust, and you couldn't even see his nose, just blood seeping out of a crack in his face. The count ordered us to stop; he got out, had a look, and said, 'Dead.' After threatening me with a thrashing when we got home for what I'd done, he ordered me to hurry up and get to the monastery. People were sent from the monastery to the bridge, while the count negotiated with the abbot, and in autumn a whole convoy of oats, flour, and dried carp was sent as a present to the monastery, while I was whipped behind the monastery shed by my father. He did so without making me take my trousers off, so it wasn't a proper thrashing, because it was my job to get on a horse and ride back that day. That was the end of that, but that same night the monk I'd whipped to death came to me in a vision, weeping again like an old woman.

"I asked him, 'What do you want from me? Go away!'

"He answered, 'You took my life before I could be shriven.'

" 'Well, that can't be helped,' I replied. 'What am I supposed to do with you now? I didn't do it on purpose. Anyway, what have you got to complain about? You've died, and that's the end of it.'

" 'It may be the end,' he said, 'true, and I'm very grateful to you for that, but now I've come on behalf of your mother to ask you if you know you're her "prayed-for" son.'

" 'Of course,' I said, 'I've heard that before: Granny Fedosia told me several times.'

" 'But do you know,' he said, 'that you are also a "promised" son?'

" 'What does that mean?'

" 'It means you're promised to God.'

" 'But who promised me to God?'

" 'Your mother.'

" 'All right then,' I said. 'She can come and tell me herself, because you might have made it up.'

" 'No,' he said, 'I haven't made it up, but she can't come.'

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because,' he said, 'things here aren't the same as on earth: not everyone here can talk or move about; people do whatever they have a gift for. But if you want, I can give you a sign that will prove it.'

" 'Yes, please,' I replied, 'but what sort of sign?'

" 'The sign I'll give you,' he said, 'is that you will often be in peril, but you won't perish until your real perdition comes, and then you'll remember the promise your mother made on your behalf and you'll become a monk.'

" 'Wonderful,' I said. 'I agree and look forward to it.'

"So he vanished, and I woke up, then forgot about it: I didn't suspect that all these mortal perils would now begin, one after the other. Shortly afterward, the count, the countess, and I went to Voronezh—we were taking their bandy-legged daughter to be cured by the newly revealed saintly relicts. We stopped at Krutoye, a village in Elets district, to feed the horses, and I fell asleep under the water trough. Again, I dreamed of the monk whose life I had taken. He came up to me and said, 'Listen, Bighead, I'm sorry for you; ask your masters as soon as you can to let you go to a monastery: they'll let you.'

"I replied, 'Why should I?'

“He said, ‘Watch out, otherwise you’re going to suffer a lot of bad things.’

“I thought, all right: you’re bound to try to predict something nasty for me, since I killed you. Then I got up, helped my father harness the horses, and we drove off. There happened to be a really steep hill nearby, with a sheer drop on one side, and an awful lot of people had lost their lives falling over it. So the count says, ‘Keep a lookout, Bighead, be careful.’

“I was very good at managing that sort of thing; even though the shaft reins, which had to be dropped, were the job of the coachman, I knew a lot and could help my father. His shaft horses were strong and flinched at nothing, they could lower themselves to take you down the slope, so that their tails touched the ground, but one of them was a real rogue, an astronomer, because the moment you gave him a hard tug, he’d jerk his head up and, God knows why, start staring at the sky. These born-astronomer horses are the worst kind, and they’re especially dangerous between the shafts: a postilion always has to keep an eye on a horse with that habit, because the astronomer can’t see where it’s putting its hooves and can end up anywhere. Of course, I knew all about this and I knew my astronomer, and I always helped my father: I used my left elbow to hold the reins of my own saddle horse and of the left-hand leading horse, and I’d place them so that their tails would be right in the faces of the shaft horses, and the shaft would be between their flanks, while I’d always have my whip ready, so the astronomer could see it, and the moment I caught him trying to stare at the sky, I’d give him one over his nose, so he’d lower his head straightaway, and we could manage the descent nicely. It was like that this time: we were driving the carriage downhill and I was turning around, you understand, to face the shaft and I was controlling the astronomer with my whip. But I suddenly saw that the horse was taking no notice of my father’s reins or of my whip; his mouth was bleeding from the bit and his eyes were goggling; I suddenly heard something screech and then bang behind me, and the whole carriage just jerked forward . . . The brakes had failed! I yelled to my father, ‘Hold them, hold them!’ and he yelled back, ‘Hold them, hold them!’ But there was no way of holding anything when all six horses were bolting as if they had the plague and couldn’t see where they were going: I suddenly saw something flash past my eyes and when I looked, I saw my father flying off the coach box—the reins had broken . . . And there was that terrible abyss ahead of us . . . I don’t know whether I felt sorrier for my masters or for myself, but when I saw myself facing certain death, I hurled myself off the saddled horse straight onto the shaft and hung on to the end of it . . . Again, I don’t know what I weighed at the time, but the leverage would have made me very heavy indeed, and I crushed the shaft horses so hard that they gasped and, when I looked, I saw there were no horses in front, as if they’d been cut loose, and I was hanging over the abyss, while the carriage was standing still, braced against the back of three horses that I had crushed with the shaft.

“That was the moment I came to my senses and felt afraid; my hands broke free and off I flew, and that’s all I remember. I don’t know how much later it was when I came to and saw I was in someone’s hut, and a great big peasant was asking me, ‘Well, young fellow, are you alive after all?’

“I answered, ‘I must be.’

“ ‘And do you remember,’ he asked, ‘what happened to you?’

“I tried to remember something and recalled the horses bolting and myself hurling my body onto the end of the shaft and ending up hanging over the great ravine; what happened after that, I didn’t know.

“The peasant was just smiling. ‘Anyway, how could you know? Even your front three horses didn’t survive when they fell into that ravine: they were smashed to pieces, but some invisible force seems to have saved you. You fell onto a pile of clay and slid down like a sleigh. We thought you were dead, but when we had a look you were breathing, it’s just that flying through the air knocked you out. Well, now, if you can, get up, and let’s get you as fast as we can to see the saint’s relicts: the count left some money to bury you if you died or to take you to Voronezh if you survived.’

“So off I went, but I didn’t say a word all the way there: I just listened to this peasant, who was driving me there, playing ‘Lady-Madam-Lady’ on his accordion.

“When we reached Voronezh, the count summoned me to his apartment and told his countess, ‘Here he is, Countess: we owe our lives to this boy.’

“The countess merely shook her head, while the count said, ‘Bighead, you can ask me for anything you want; I’ll do anything for you.’

“I said, ‘I don’t know what to ask for!’

“He said, ‘Well, what would you like to have?’

“I thought hard and said, ‘An accordion.’

“The count laughed and said, ‘Well, you really are a fool, but that’s no matter: when the time comes, I’ll remember you. But now,’ he said, ‘buy him an accordion right away.’

“His footman went to the shops and brought an accordion to the stables for me. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘Play it.’

“I meant to take it and play, but I saw that I had no idea how to, so I gave up there and then, and the next day some pilgrim women stole it from under the shed floor.

“I should have used the opportunity, when the count was well disposed to me, and asked to be sent to the monastery, as the monk advised me. I don’t even know why I asked for an accordion and resisted my main vocation. That was why I now went from one ordeal to another, having more and more to endure, but I never perished, until everything the monk had predicted would happen to me came true in actual life, despite my disbelief.”

3

“After I had this generous gift from my masters, we bought six new horses in Voronezh and all went home; almost immediately I got myself a pair of crested doves, a male and a female, which I kept with me in the stables, letting them nest on a shelf. The male was light brown, the female was white, with red legs, and extremely pretty . . . I was very fond of them: especially when the male pigeon cooed at night; it was such a pleasant sound, and in the day they flew among the horses, perched on the manger, pecking at the horse food and kissing each other . . . It was a very comforting sight for a young child.

“After all this kissing they had offspring: they raised one pair, and when the squabs fledged, they did a lot more kissing, and again they sat on the eggs and hatched more . . . The pigeon squabs had no feathers; they seemed to be covered in wool; they were as yellow as the grass seed heads we called ‘cat’s wafers,’ and their noses were uglier than a Circassian prince’s, great big ones . . . I started taking a close look at these squabs; I didn’t want to squash them, so I took one by its nose and looked and looked, I couldn’t take my eyes off it, it was so soft, but the male pigeon kept trying to snatch it from me. I decided to have fun with him, teasing him with the squab. But when I was putting the squab back in the nest, it stopped breathing. That was really upsetting: I warmed it in my cupped hands and breathed over it, hoping to revive it. No, it was a goner, and that was that! I lost my temper and just flung it out of the window. Never mind, the other squab was still in the nest. As for this dead one, a white cat suddenly appeared from nowhere, ran past, grabbed the bird, and rushed off. I’d spotted that cat before, and noted that it was white all over, except for a black spot, like a hat on its head. All right, I thought, to hell with it, it can eat the dead squab. But when it was night and I was asleep I could hear a pigeon on the shelf over my bed angrily fighting something off. I jumped up and looked: it was a moonlit night, so I could see that same white cat dragging away my other pigeon squab, the live one.

“ ‘No,’ I thought, ‘why should it get away with that?’ I chased it, flung my boot at it, but missed: so it stole my pigeon squab and probably ate it somewhere. My pigeons had lost their children, but they didn’t grieve for long: they started kissing again and had another pair of chicks, but that damned cat got there first . . . The devil knows how she kept an eye on all this, but I only had to look to see her in broad daylight dragging off another squab, and so neatly that I had nothing at hand to throw at her. But this time I decided to teach her a lesson and I set a bird trap in the window, so that the moment she poked her nose in at night, it sprang shut and there she sat, complaining and mewing. I took her straight out of the trap, stuck her head and front paws down my boot to stop her scratching me, then I took hold of her hind legs and tail with my left hand in a gauntlet, used my right hand to take the whip off the wall, and went to my bedstead to give her a good lesson. I must have given her a hundred and fifty or so lashes, and as hard as I could, so she even stopped struggling. Then I took the cat out of the boot, wondering if it had croaked or not. I thought I had a way of seeing whether it was alive or not, so I put it on the threshold and chopped off its tail with a hatchet: she yowled ‘meow,’ shook from head to tail, wheeled right over about ten times, then ran off.

“ ‘Good,’ I thought, ‘now I don’t expect you’ll come after my pigeon squabs again.’ And to make her even more afraid, the next morning I took the tail I’d chopped off and nailed it outside the stable over my window. It was an hour, or no more than two hours, later when I saw the countess’s maid running in: she’d never in her life come to the stables. Holding a parasol, she was shouting, ‘Aha, aha! Is that who it was? That’s who it was!’

“I asked, ‘What’s going on?’

“ ‘Was it you,’ she asked, ‘who maimed Zozinka? Admit it. Isn’t it your window that her tail’s been nailed to?’

“I said, ‘Why make such a fuss about nailing up a tail?’

“ ‘How could you dare?’ she said.

“ ‘She dared to eat my pigeon squabs, didn’t she?’

“ ‘As if your pigeon squabs mattered!’

“ ‘The cat’s nothing to write home about, either.’

“By now, actually, I was old enough to swear at people. ‘What’s so important,’ I said, ‘about a cat?’

“She was a real termagant: ‘How dare you say such things: you must know that it’s my cat, and the countess herself strokes her.’ Then she slaps my cheek with her ladylike hand. Ever since I was a child, I’ve always hit back, and I didn’t hesitate: I grabbed a dirty broom from behind the doors and started hitting her around the waist . . .

“My God, the trouble that caused! I was taken to the estate office to be dealt with by the manager, a German; his decision was to have me thrashed as severely as possible and then to throw me out of the stables into the English garden where I would break stones with a hammer to make a path . . . The flogging was horribly cruel, I couldn’t even get to my feet, so they carried me on a piece of matting back to my father’s quarters; I wouldn’t have minded that, but the last bit of my sentence, to be on my knees breaking stones, was such torment to me that I decided to put an end to my life. I’d saved up a strong cord for tying loaves of sugar: I’d begged the cord from a boy footman. In the evening I went off to bathe and then walked to the aspen copse behind the threshing-floor yard; I knelt down, prayed for all Christians, tied the cord to a branch, made a noose, and stuck my head in it. I only needed to jump and it would be all over . . . Given my nature, I’d have had no trouble doing that, but no sooner had I taken a running jump and swung off from the branch, hanging in the air, when I saw I was lying on the ground. A Gypsy was standing in front of me, laughing: he was holding a knife and his teeth shone white in his pitch-black mug.

“ ‘What do you think you’re doing, fellow?’ he asked.

“ ‘What business is it of yours?’ I said.

“He wouldn’t give up. ‘Finding life too hard?’ he asked.

“ ‘As you can see,’ I said, ‘it’s no bed of roses.’

“ ‘Well, instead of hanging yourself, come with me,’ he said, ‘and let’s spend time together; then you might end up hanged for some other reason.’

“ ‘Who are you, and how do you earn a living? I’ll bet you’re a thief.’

“ ‘Yes, we are: we’re thieves and crooks.’

“ ‘I was right, wasn’t I, and I expect there are times when you murder people, too.’

“ ‘It happens,’ he said, ‘we go in for that, too.’

“I thought hard about what I should do now. At home it would be the same tomorrow and the days after: on my knees, banging away at stones with a hammer. This job had already raised lumps on my knees and all I could hear ringing in my ears was people laughing at me because, thanks to the cat’s tail, that vicious German had sentenced me to crush a mountain of stones. Everyone was laughing. ‘Call yourself a lifesaver too! You saved the masters’ lives!’ I had simply run out of patience; I weighed the situation and saw that if I wasn’t going to hang myself, then I’d have to go back to all that, so I washed my hands of everything, cried for a bit, and went off to be a robber.”

4

“The cunning Gypsy didn’t give me a moment to come to my senses. He said, ‘If I’m to be sure you won’t go back, what you have to do now is bring a pair of horses from the master’s stables, and bring the very best ones, so we can gallop off as far as we can before morning.’

“That made me miserable: I desperately wanted to not be a thief. But I’d made my bed and now had to lie in it: so, knowing all the ins and outs of the stables, I had no trouble bringing a pair of lively horses out behind the barn. These were horses that never tired, but the Gypsy had already pulled out of his pocket strings of wolves’ teeth, which he hung around both horses’ necks. Then we mounted the horses and rode off. Sensing wolves’ teeth on their necks, the horses went so fast that ‘gallop’ doesn’t describe their pace, and by the morning we were a hundred kilometers away, not far from the town of Karachev. We immediately sold them to some innkeeper in Karachev, took the money, and went to a river to share it out. For the horses we got three hundred rubles, in paper money, of course, a quarter of the value of silver: the Gypsy gave me only one silver ruble, saying, ‘That’s your share.’

“I felt I’d been treated badly. ‘Why,’ I asked, ‘is my share so small, when I was the one who stole the horses and I could have gotten into worse trouble than you?’

“ ‘Because that’s how it is,’ he answered.

“ ‘That’s stupid. Why do you take so much for yourself?’ I asked.

“ ‘For the same reason: I’m the expert, and you’re still learning.’

“ ‘What do you mean, “still learning”? You’re talking rubbish!’ and we kept on bickering, and we

quarreled. Finally I said, ‘I’m not going to go any farther with you, because you’re a swine.’

“His reply was: ‘For Christ’s sake, stop pestering me, pal: you have no papers and having you around will make things tricky for me.’

“So we parted company, and I thought I’d go and see the magistrate and declare myself a runaway serf, but when I told the clerk about myself, he said to me, ‘You’re a fool, a fool. Why would you want to declare yourself a runaway; have you got ten rubles?’

“ ‘No,’ I said. ‘I’ve got just one ruble, I don’t have ten.’

“ ‘Well, perhaps you’ve got something else, maybe a silver cross around your neck, or what’s that in your ear? An earring?’

“ ‘Yes, it’s an earring,’ I said.

“ ‘Silver?’

“ ‘Silver, and I’ve got a silver cross too, from Saint Mitrofani’s church in Voronezh.’

“ ‘Take them off, then,’ he said, ‘and let me have them quick, I’ll write you release papers. Then go to Nikolaev on the Black Sea; they’re short of people there, and a hell of a lot of runaways are leaving here to hide out there.’

“I handed him my ruble, cross, and earring, and he wrote me a release document, stamped it with the police chief’s stamp, and told me, ‘I really should charge you more for the stamp, but I’m sorry for you since you’re poor, and anyway, I don’t want any release papers that I hand out to be dodgy. Off you go, and if anyone else needs help, send him to me.’

“ ‘All right,’ I thought, ‘very charitable of him! He takes the cross off my neck and still feels sorry for me.’ I didn’t send anyone to him, I just walked the roads without a penny to my name, hoping for charity.

“I got to Nikolaev and took my place in the market square, hoping to be offered work. There weren’t many people for hire: just three of us, and the others, I reckon, were like me, runaways, but there were a lot of people rushing out to hire men, and they all grabbed and tugged at us, getting a close hold, or laying claim to us. A gentleman went for me, he was gigantic, bigger than me, and just shoved everyone else away from me and grabbed me by both hands and dragged me off. As he led me off, he used his fists to punch everyone else out of the way, swearing very nastily, yet there were tears in his eyes. He led me to a little house, cobbled together out of God knows what, and asked me, ‘Tell me the truth, you’re a runaway serf, aren’t you?’

“I said I was.

“ ‘A thief, or a murderer, or just a runaway?’ he asked.

“ ‘Why are you asking all these questions?’ I responded.

“ ‘So I have a better idea of what job you’re fit for.’

“I told him all my reasons for running away: he suddenly embraced me, kissed me, and said, ‘If you felt sorry for your squabs, you can take care of my baby. I’m taking you on as a nursemaid.’

“I was horrified and said, ‘What do you mean, nursemaid? I’m not suited at all to that trade.’

“ ‘No, it’s easy work,’ he said, ‘easy. I can see you’d make a good nanny. I’m in bad trouble, because my wife got dispirited: she abandoned me for a remount officer and left me with a baby daughter who’s still on breast milk, and I don’t have the time or the milk for her. So you can wean her, and I’ll pay you two silver rubles a month wages.’

“ ‘Come on,’ I said, ‘the two rubles are neither here nor there, but how do I cope with the job?’

“ ‘Nonsense,’ he said, ‘you’re Russian, aren’t you: a Russian can cope with anything.’

“ ‘Look, I may be a Russian, but I’m a man, and I don’t have what’s needed to rear a breastfed baby.’

“ ‘All right,’ he said, ‘to help you do it, I’ll buy a nanny goat from a Jew for you: you milk it, and rear my daughter on the milk.’

“I pondered for a bit, then said, ‘Of course you can rear a baby on goat’s milk, but I think you’d be better off with a woman for this job.’

“ ‘No, please don’t mention women to me,’ he answered, ‘they’re responsible for all this trouble, and anyway there’s nowhere I could find one. If you don’t agree to be my daughter’s nanny, then I’ll call for the Cossacks, have you tied up and taken to the police, and then you’ll be deported under escort. Now choose what’s best for you: smashing stones for the count’s garden paths, or bringing up my child.’

“I thought it over. I wasn’t going to go back, so I agreed to stay on as a nanny. That same day we bought a white goat and its kid from a Jew. I slaughtered the kid, and my employer and I ate it with noodles; I milked the goat and started feeding the baby with the milk. The baby was tiny, such a vile wretched thing: it wouldn’t stop squealing. My master, its father, was a government official; he had Polish blood, and the rogue was never at home but constantly running around to see his fellow officials for a game of cards, so I was left alone with my charge, the baby girl. I got terribly attached to her,

because I found the boredom unbearable and, with nothing else to do, I kept myself busy with her. I'd put her in a trough and give her a good wash, and if she had a rash on her tender skin, then I'd put flour on it right away; I'd comb her hair or dandle her on my knees and, if I was very bored in the house, I'd go to the lagoon to wash the linen, and the goat, who'd gotten used to us, would come too for the walk. So I managed until the next summer, and my baby grew and started to stand on her own feet, but I noticed that she was bowlegged. I tried to get my master's attention, but he showed no concern, just saying, 'What's that got to do with me? Take her to the doctor; let him have a look.'

"I took her to the doctor, who said, 'It's the English disease, rickets, you have to bury her in sand.'

"So I began doing as he said: I chose a place on the shore of the lagoon where there was sand, and on a quiet warm day I'd take the goat and the little girl and go off there with them. I used my hands to scrape away the warm sand and bury the baby up to the waist, and give her a stick and some pebbles to play with, while our goat walked around, nibbling at the grass, and I just sat there with my arms around my legs and fell asleep.

"The three of us spent whole days like this, and that was the best way of coping with the boredom, because, I repeat, life was horribly boring, and especially in spring when I started burying the baby in sand and sleeping on the shores of the lagoon, I had all sorts of senseless dreams. When I fell asleep, with the waves lapping the shore and a warm wind blowing onto me from the steppes, something bewitching seemed to come over me, and I was struck by terrible visions: I could see steppes, horses, and could hear someone calling me, luring me, even shouting my name: 'Ivan! Ivan! Brother Ivan, come!' I'd come to with a shudder, shiver, and spit: 'Ugh, to hell with you, why are you calling out to me?' I'd look all around: I felt hopeless—the goat had wandered off, nibbling the grass, and the baby was sitting buried in the sand, that was all there was . . . Oh, how boring! Wasteland, sun, and lagoon. Then I'd fall asleep again, and this current of air would again get inside me and shout, 'Ivan! Let's go, brother Ivan!' I'd even curse roundly and say, 'Why don't you show yourself, the devil take you, who are you, why are you calling me like this?' Once I got really angry and sat there looking beyond the lagoon, and something like a small cloud rose up and drifted straight toward me. I thought, 'Ah, you pest, so you're going to soak me as well.' Then I suddenly saw the monk with an old peasant woman's face standing over me: the monk that I had lashed to death when I was a postilion. I told him, 'Shoo, clear off!' But his voice rang out so softly, 'Let's go, Ivan, let's go, brother! You still have lots more to endure, but after all that you will understand.' I cursed him in my sleep, saying, 'Where would I go with you, and what am I going to understand?' Suddenly he turned into a cloud again and revealed through himself God knows what: steppes, really savage people, Saracens, the people you get in fairy stories about Yaroslavl and Prince Bova, wearing big shaggy hats, armed with arrows, riding terrifying wild horses. As well as seeing all this, I could hear gabbling, neighing, and wild laughter; then suddenly there was a whirlwind, the sand was swept up in a cloud, and it all disappeared, I could only hear a church bell tolling quietly somewhere, and saw a big white monastery, its heights bathed in the light of a red sunset, while winged angels with golden spears patrolled its walls; the monastery was surrounded by sea, and whenever an angel struck its shield with a spear, the sea would surge and splash all around the monastery, and frightful voices would call out from the depths, 'Holy!'

" 'So,' I thought, 'I've got these monastic visions starting again.' I woke up annoyed, and I was amazed to see someone of an extremely tender appearance kneeling in the sand over my little gentlewoman and weeping a torrent of tears.

"I spent some time watching, because I still wondered if this was a continuation of my vision, but then I saw that the vision wasn't fading, so I got up and approached it: a lady had dug the little girl out of the sand, had picked her up, and was kissing her and weeping.

"I asked her, 'What do you want?'

"She rushed at me, pressing the baby to her breast, and whispered, 'That's my child, my daughter, she's my daughter!'

" 'What difference does that make?' I asked.

" 'Let me have her,' she said.

" 'What makes you think I'll hand her over to you?'

" 'You must be sorry for her, surely,' she said, weeping. 'You can see how she clings to me.'

" 'That's because she's a silly baby; she clings to me too, but there's no way I'll hand her over.'

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because I've been entrusted with looking after her: the goat over there comes with us, and I've got to take the baby back to her father.'

"The lady started crying again and wringing her hands. 'All right,' she said, 'if you won't hand the baby over to me, at least don't tell my husband, your master, that you've seen me: come back here, the

same place, tomorrow with the baby so that I can cuddle her again.'

" 'That's a different matter altogether: that I can promise to do.'

"In fact, I told my master nothing, and the next morning took the goat and the baby to the lagoon once again, where the lady was already waiting. She had been sitting all this time in a pit in the dunes, but she leaped up when she saw us and ran toward us, weeping and laughing; she thrust toys into both hands of the baby and even hung a red ribbon with a bell over our goat. She gave me a pipe, a pouch full of tobacco, and a comb.

" 'Please, smoke this pipe while I nurse the baby.'

"That's how we started meeting by the lagoon: the lady stayed with the baby while I slept, and sometimes she would start telling me about . . . you know . . . her marriage to my master back in Poland, how she was married off against her will by a spiteful stepmother and . . . you know . . . she couldn't . . . you know . . . get to love this man. And the other man, you know, the remount officer, I suppose she did love, and she complained that she'd been . . . delivered . . . to her husband against her will. 'You know yourself,' she said, 'that my husband leads a disorderly life. Whereas the other man with . . . you know . . . those mustaches, or whatever they are called, is always decently dressed and kind to me. But,' she says, 'all the same I can't be happy with him, because I miss the baby. Now we've come here and we're staying in the apartment of one of his fellow officers, but I can't stop worrying that my husband will find out, then we'll leave very soon, and I'll suffer again without the baby.'

" 'Well, what can you do? If you break the law and go against religion, breaking your vows, then you're bound to suffer.'

"She began to weep, and after that day she began weeping more and more miserably, and I was getting fed up with her complaints; then, out of the blue, she suddenly started offering me money. Finally, she came to say goodbye for the last time, saying, 'Listen, Ivan' (by now she knew my name) 'to what I have to say: any moment *he* will come and join us.'

"I asked her who *he* was.

"She replied, 'The remount officer.'

"I said, 'What's that got to do with me?'

"She explained that he had apparently won an awful lot of money at cards that night and said he wanted to please her by giving me a thousand rubles to hand her daughter over to her.

" 'There's no way that's ever going to happen,' I said.

" 'Why not, Ivan? Whyever not?' She wouldn't give up. 'Aren't you sorry for the two of us having to be separated?'

" 'My being sorry has nothing to do with it: it's just that I've never let myself be bought at any price, big or small, so the remount officer can keep all his thousands, and I keep your daughter.'

"She just went on weeping, so I said, 'There's no point in your crying, because I don't care.'

"She said, 'You have no heart; you're as hard as nails.'

"I answered, 'I'm not as hard as nails; I'm like anyone else, flesh and blood, but I'm conscientious and loyal: I took on the job of caring for the child, so I'm looking after her.'

"She tried to persuade me that, if I thought about it, I'd see the child would be better off with her.

" 'No difference,' I said, 'that's not my business.'

" 'Surely,' she shouted, 'surely I won't have to be separated from my child again?'

" 'You have to be,' I said, 'if you break the law and go against religion . . .'

"I didn't finish saying what I had to say: I saw a light-cavalry man, an uhlan, coming toward us over the steppe. At that time, regimental officers went about as they should, for show, in real military uniform, not like today's officers who look like clerks. So this uhlan remount officer approaches, his back firm and straight, his hands on his hips, wearing his greatcoat unbuttoned . . . he might not have any physical strength but he looked impressive . . . I looked at this stranger, thinking, 'It would relieve the boredom to have a good go at him.' So I decided that the moment he said anything to me, I'd be as rude as I possibly could, and then, perhaps, with a bit of luck, we could have a really good fight here. I was delighted: it would be wonderful, and I stopped listening to the lady's words, her weeping, her babbling: I just wanted a bit of fun."

5

"Once I'd decided to have a bit of amusement, I had to consider, however, the best way of provoking the officer into attacking me. So I sat down, took a comb from my pocket, and pretended to be combing my hair. The officer comes up and starts talking to his lady friend. She goes on nattering at him, all about me

not handing the baby over.

"He strokes her head and says, 'It's all right, darling, all right: I'll find a way of dealing with him. We'll shower him with money, it'll make him roll his eyes; and if that doesn't work, we'll simply take the child off him.' Saying that, he comes over to me and hands me a bundle of banknotes, with the words: 'Here's a thousand rubles, exactly: give us the child, take the money, and go wherever you want to.'

"I was being deliberately uncouth: I took my time before I answered. I got up quietly, reattached the comb to my belt, cleared my throat, and then spoke: 'No, Your Honor, your way of doing things won't work.' And I took the money, ripping it from his hands, spat on it, and threw the notes down, saying, 'Good dog, go, fetch, pick up, heel!'

"He was very put out, turned bright red, and went for me. But, as you see, I'm well built and don't need long to sort out an officer in full dress: I only had to give him a shove and he was mine—he flew over, his spurs up in the air, and his saber bent to one side. I immediately stamped my foot onto the saber and told him, 'See how I can trample all your courage underfoot.'

"He wasn't particularly strong, perhaps, but he was a plucky little officer: he saw he wasn't going to get his saber off me, so he unbelted it and attacked me with his little fists . . . Of course, all he got in return was some nasty bruises, but I liked the proud, noble temper he showed. I wouldn't take his money, and he wasn't going to pick it up, either.

"When we stopped fighting, I shouted, 'Take it, Your Honor, pick up your money, you'll need it for your travel expenses!'

"Would you believe it? He didn't pick the money up, he just ran straight for the child and tried to grab it, but, of course, he took it by one arm, and I immediately seized the other. 'Go on,' I said, 'pull it: let's see who tears off the biggest part.'

"He was yelling, 'You scoundrel, scoundrel, you monster!' Then he spat in my face and dropped the baby, and went off with just his lady friend. She was screaming desperately, but she went with him because he was dragging her by force, her arms stretched out toward me and the baby . . . So I could see and feel her being torn apart alive, half to him, half to the child . . . That moment I suddenly spotted the gentleman I was working for running up from the town: he was firing a pistol and shouting, 'Stop them, Ivan! Stop them!'

" 'Well,' I thought, 'how do you think I'm going to stop them? They're in love: leave them be!' I chased after the lady and the uhlan, gave them the child, and said, 'Here's your little scamp. But now you've got to take me, too, or he'll hand me to the authorities, because my papers are illegal.'

"She said, 'Let's go, Ivan, darling, let's go, we'll live together.'

"So we galloped off, taking the little girl I'd been raising. We left my master with the goat, the money, and my papers.

"I spent the whole journey with my new masters on the wagon's box seat until we reached Penza: as I sat there, I wondered if I'd done the right thing by hitting the officer. After all, he had taken an oath to his country, which he was defending with his saber, and, very likely, the Tsar himself respected his rank enough to address him formally, while I, like a fool, had abused him! After I stopped thinking about this, I began to ponder something else: Where would my fate now take me? There was a fair in Penza, and the uhlan said to me, 'Listen, Ivan, you realize, I expect, that I can't keep you with me.'

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because I'm a serving officer,' he replied, 'and you have no papers.'

" 'But I did have papers, only they were forged.'

" 'So there you are,' he said. 'You don't even have that, now. Here's two hundred rubles for your travel expenses, so off you go, wherever you want.'

"I must admit that the last thing I wanted was to leave them, because I was fond of the child. But there was nothing to be done, so I said, 'Farewell, then. I'm very grateful for your reward money, but there is something else.'

" 'What,' he asked, 'would that be?'

" 'The thing is,' I replied, 'I owe you an apology for fighting you and being rude.'

"He burst out laughing, and said, 'That's nothing; for heaven's sake, you're a good man.'

" 'No, sir,' I responded, 'good or not, we can't leave it at that, because it might stay on my conscience: you're a defender of the fatherland, and the Tsar himself probably speaks to you respectfully.'

" 'True,' he said. 'When we're promoted, the document says: "We honor you and we order people to give you deference and respect." '

" 'So you must understand that I can't bear this anymore . . .'

" 'Well, there's nothing we can do about that now. We can't undo the fact that you were stronger than me and gave me a thrashing.'

“ ‘We can’t undo it,’ I said, ‘but at least you can relieve my conscience, if you see fit, by hitting me a few times.’ And I puffed out both my cheeks as I faced him.

“ ‘But why should I? Whyever should I start hitting you?’

“ ‘You should do it,’ I replied, ‘to relieve my conscience, so I won’t get away scot-free with insulting an officer of the Tsar.’

“He laughed, but I puffed out my cheeks as far as I could and stood there.

“He asked, ‘Why are you puffing your cheeks, why are you making faces?’

“I said, ‘I’m doing it like a soldier, according to army regulations. Please hit me on both cheeks.’ I puffed out my cheeks again, and suddenly, instead of hitting me, he stepped toward me and kissed me, of all things. He said, ‘Stop it, Ivan, for Christ’s sake: I wouldn’t hit you for anything in the world. But clear off as fast as you can, while Masha and her daughter are out of the house, otherwise they’ll both bawl if they see you going.’

“ ‘Ah, well, that’s quite another matter: I wouldn’t want to upset them.’

“However reluctant I was to go, I had no choice: so I left as quickly as I could, without saying goodbye. As I passed through the gates I stopped and thought, ‘Where shall I go now?’ In fact, a great deal of time had passed since I ran away from my masters to wander the roads, and I still had nowhere to lay down my head . . . ‘I give up,’ I thought. ‘I’ll go and hand myself over to the police, but that’ll be awkward, now that I’ve got money: the police will confiscate it. I should spend just a bit of it, if only to have my fill of tea and pretzels at the inn. So I went to an inn at the fair and asked for tea and pretzels; I took my time over them, and then I saw that there was no way of spinning it out, and I walked about for a bit. I crossed the Sura River into the steppes, where there were herds of horses tended by Tatars living in felt tents. The Tatar tents were all identical, except for one that was very garish, and a lot of various gentlemen were gathered around, busy trying out riding horses. The men were of all sorts—civilians and officers, as well as landowners who had come to the fair—and they were standing there, smoking pipes, surrounding a lanky steppe Tatar, as thin as a beanpole, wearing a rich patchwork gown and a gold embroidered skullcap and seated on a colorful felt rug. I looked around, saw somebody who had been drinking tea in the inn when I was there, and asked him who this important Tatar was, to be sitting alone, surrounded by everyone. The man replied, ‘Surely you know him? It’s Khan Jangar.’

“ ‘And who might Khan Jangar be?’

“The man told me, ‘Khan Jangar is the greatest horse breeder in the steppes; his herds stretch from the Volga all the way to the Urals, to the Ryn sand dunes, and you can say that this Khan Jangar is the king of the steppes.’

“ ‘Don’t the steppes belong to us Russians?’

“ ‘They do, but we can’t lay claim to them, because there’s nothing but salt marshes or grasslands and birds from here to the Caspian Sea, and government officials can’t make any profit out of the steppes, so that’s why Khan Jangar is king there; they say he has his own clerics, senior and junior, his courtiers, his own imams and mullahs, hajjis, dervishes, and officials, and he orders them about as he likes, and they’re all happy to obey him.’

“I watched as I listened to what he said, and saw a Tatar boy ride a small white mare up to this khan and babble something; the khan got to his feet, took a long-handled whip, and stood by the mare’s head, let the whip touch its brow while he himself stayed still. But you should have seen how that bandit stood there: just like a splendid statue. You couldn’t help looking at him: you could see that he was pondering the whole essence of the horse. That was a subject which I’d been very observant about ever since childhood, so it was clear to me that the mare herself recognized that the khan was a connoisseur, and she held herself to attention in front of him, as if to say, ‘Look at me and admire me!’ And the steppe Tatar kept staring at this mare in the same way. He didn’t walk around her, the way our officers do when they make such a fuss and bother about a horse: he just looked from one standpoint and then suddenly lowered his whip and kissed his own fingers, as if to say, ‘A rare specimen!’ Then he sat back on his felt rug, tucking his legs under him, while the mare pricked up her ears and began to fidget.

“The gentlemen standing around competed with one another to buy her: one offered a hundred rubles, the next a hundred and fifty, and so on, each raising the offer. True, the mare was a wonderful creature, not a big horse like an Arabian but a neat little animal with a small head, full eyes, dappled, with alert ears; its flanks were like drums, airy and resonant, its back was like an arrow, its legs light and finely carved, ready to take you away at a gallop. I was a great admirer of that kind of beauty, so I couldn’t take my eyes off the mare. Khan Jangar could see that she had driven everyone wild, that the gentlemen, as enthusiastic as newly converted acolytes, were sending the price soaring; so he nodded to the grubby Tatar boy, who leaped onto the swanlike mare and sent her galloping: he rode her in typical Tatar style, squeezing her with his knees, and she just took wing, flying off like a bird without a single flutter; the

boy bent down to her neck and urged her on, and the mare and the sand under her hooves became a whirlwind. ‘Oh, you snake!’ I thought. ‘Oh, you cunning steppe bustard! What country could have produced you?’ I felt my entire soul longing for her, this mare, with the passion of a blood relative. The Tatar brought her back at a gallop, she snorted through both nostrils, expelled her air, and shook off any tiredness, neither gasping nor breathing noisily. ‘Oh, my darling,’ I thought, ‘my darling.’ I reckon that if the Tatar had asked me not only for my soul but also for my mother and father in exchange for the mare, I wouldn’t have hesitated. But what hope had I of getting such a flyer, when the gentlemen and remount officers had raised the price to God knows what; worse still, it suddenly turned out that the trading wouldn’t end there, and nobody got the horse, for we saw a fast rider come galloping from Seliksa, the other side of the Sura, waving his broad-rimmed hat and leaping down, abandoning his own horse and going straight to the white mare, again standing by her head like the first statue. The man said, ‘The mare is mine.’

“The khan replied, ‘I don’t think so: the gentlemen are offering me five hundred rubles for her.’

“This rider was a great big Tatar with a paunch, his face so suntanned that the skin was peeling, as though it had been torn off, and his eyes just small slits: he immediately roared, ‘I’ll give a hundred rubles more than anyone!’

“The gentlemen got excited and promised even more, while the imperturbable Khan Jangar sat there smacking his lips; meanwhile yet another Tatar rider came galloping from the Sura, riding a fox-colored horse with a long white mane. This Tatar was thin and jaundiced looking, just skin and bones, but even more worked up than the first one. He wriggled as he dismounted and dug his heels into the ground in front of the white mare, saying, ‘I’ll outbid anyone: that mare has to be mine!’

“So I asked my neighbor what had led to all this business. He told me, ‘Everything depends on Khan Jangar’s big idea. Several times, at almost every fair, he’s set things up by first selling all the ordinary horses he’s brought, and then, on the last day of the fair, the devil knows where from, he slips out one or two horses so good that the horse lovers lose their wits. He’s a cunning Tatar and he’s amused by the sight of them, as well as making money. People know this habit of his, so everyone waits for this last offer, and that’s what’s happening now: everyone’s been assuming the khan would be leaving soon, and tonight he will leave, but look at the mare he’s just brought out . . .’

“ ‘It’s an amazing horse,’ I said.

“ ‘A real marvel; they say he brought it to the fair hidden in the middle of the herd, driving it so nobody could see it for the other horses, so nobody knew about it, except the two Tatars who’ve just arrived, and he’s told them that the mare’s not for sale, it’s a special one, and he separated it last night from the others and drove it off to the forest by Mordovsky Ishim, where he had a special herdsman to graze it; now he’s brought it back and is offering it for sale. You just wait and see the extraordinary things that are going to happen and what that dog is going to get for it. If you like, let’s have a bet about who’ll get it.’

“ ‘What do you mean? Why should we bet on it?’

“ ‘Because there’s going to be real fury: all the gentlemen will back out, and one of those two Asiatics will get the horse.’

“ ‘Are they so very rich, then?’ I asked.

“ ‘They’re not just rich, they’re determined horse lovers: they have their own big herds and will never let the other man get such a good, special horse. Everyone knows them: the big-bellied one with the peeling face is Bakshei Otuchev, and the thin little man who’s all skin and bones is Chepkun Yemgurchei. They’re nasty rivals, and you’ll see the spectacle they put on.’

“I stopped talking and just looked: the gentlemen who’d been bidding for the mare had now stepped back and were just onlookers, while the two Tatars jostled each other and constantly clapped Khan Jangar’s hands, but still clinging to the mare and shaking as they shouted. One of them yelled, ‘As well as the rubles, I offer five horses.’ The other screamed, ‘You’re talking rubbish: I offer ten.’

“Bakshei Otuchev shouts, ‘I offer fifteen horses.’

“Chepkun Yemgurchei offers twenty; Bakshei, twenty-five; then Chepkun, thirty. You might have thought that was the limit for both of them, but no . . . Chepkun had shouted, ‘Thirty,’ and no more, and so had Bakshei; but Chepkun promised a saddle in addition, while Bakshei offers a saddle and a gown, after which Chepkun adds a gown, and again they were at a standstill. Chepkun yelled, ‘Listen, Khan Jangar, I’ll go home and I’ll fetch my daughter for you.’ But Bakshei also offered a daughter, and neither had any way of raising the offer. At this point all the Tatars at this spectacle started shouting and jabbering in their own language: they pulled the two bidders, Chepkun and Bakshei, apart to stop them ruining each other, and tried to calm them by poking them in the sides and arguing with them.

“I asked my neighbor, ‘Tell me, please, what they’re up to now.’

“ ‘You see,’ he answered, ‘those chiefs pulling them apart? They’re sorry that Chepkun and Bakshei have outbid themselves, so they’re separating them until they come to their senses and one of them lets the other have the mare in a decent way.’

“ ‘But how can either of them,’ I asked, ‘let the other have the mare, when they’re both so taken by her? It’s out of the question.’

“ ‘Don’t be so sure,’ he replied. ‘Asiatics are a reasonable, serious lot: they’ll work out that there’s no point losing everything you own, and they’ll pay Khan Jangar whatever he asks. As for who gets the horse, they’ll consent to decide that by a thrashing contest.’

“I was puzzled. ‘What’s a thrashing contest?’

“I was told, ‘Don’t ask, just look: it’s worth seeing, and it’s starting now.’

“When I looked I saw that Bakshei Otuchev and Chepkun Yemgurchei had both fallen silent and broken free of the Tatar peacemakers; the two rushed toward each other and struck each other’s hands. ‘Best man wins!’ said one, which meant they agreed to terms. ‘Best man wins,’ replied the other. They’d agreed. And the two of them threw off their gowns, their Circassian jackets and soft-leather moccasins, then removed their cotton shirts, so that they were bare except for their broad striped pants; then they plopped down opposite each other, sitting on the earth, just like a pair of steppe sandpipers.

“This was the first time I’d seen anything so strange, so I looked on, wondering what would come next. Each took the other’s left hand and held on to it, then they stretched their legs wide apart, bracing themselves against each other’s feet. They shouted, ‘Hand them over!’

“What they were demanding to be handed, I couldn’t imagine, but people in the Tatar crowd answered, ‘In a minute, boss, in a minute.’ An old, grave-looking Tatar emerged from the crowd holding two big horsewhips, so that they could be seen and compared by everyone present and by Chepkun and Bakshei. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘both whips are the same.’

“ ‘The same,’ the Tatars yelled. ‘We can all see that they’ve been made without trickery; the thongs are the same. So they can sit and begin.’

“Bakshei and Chepkun couldn’t grab the whips fast enough. But the old Tatar told them to wait, while he handed out the whips, one for Chepkun, the other for Bakshei, clapping his palms gently, once, twice, thrice . . . As soon as he’d tapped for the third time, Bakshei, using all his strength, lashed Chepkun with his whip, over the shoulder onto his back, and Chepkun did exactly the same in response. They went on treating each other in the same way: they looked each other in the eye, they braced their feet against their opponent’s and squeezed each other’s left hand, while they flogged away with their right hand . . . Oh, what a magnificent thrashing they gave each other. One delivered a stinging lash, the other responded with an even better one. Their eyes goggled and glazed over, their left hands went numb, but neither would give in.

“I asked my new acquaintance, ‘What is all this? It must be like the gentry dueling, isn’t it?’

“ ‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘It’s a sort of duel too, only not about honor: it’s about not spending too much.’

“ ‘Well,’ I asked, ‘can they go on thrashing each other like that for long?’

“ ‘For as long as they like, and as long as they have the strength.’

“The two Tatars went on flogging each other, while the spectators began arguing: some said that Chepkun would out-thrash Bakshei, others that Bakshei would out-thrash Chepkun. They started betting, some on Chepkun, some on Bakshei, whomever they fancied most. They looked knowledgeably at the duelists’ eyes and teeth, they looked at their backs, and various indications told them who was the best bet. The man I had been talking to was also an experienced spectator: at first he backed Bakshei, but then he said, ‘Oh, it’s over. I’ve lost my twenty kopecks: Chepkun is going to beat Bakshei.’

“ ‘How do you know? It’s too early to tell: they’re both still sitting up well.’

“The reply I was given was, ‘They’re both still sitting well, but their technique is different.’

“ ‘But I think that Bakshei’s blows are more ferocious.’

“ ‘That’s what’s so bad about it: no, my twenty kopecks are wasted on him. Chepkun will out-thrash him.’

“ ‘That really is a weird way of thinking,’ I thought, ‘it makes no sense.’ But I assumed that he must have a good idea of the way things worked if he laid bets on it. You know, I became very intrigued and I pestered my new acquaintance.

“ ‘Tell me,’ I asked, ‘friend, why you’re now worried for Bakshei?’

“ ‘You really are a stupid townie. Just look at the state of Bakshei’s back.’

“I looked: his back seemed in a good state: manly, big, and puffed out like a pillow.

“ ‘But,’ my friend asked, ‘can you see how he’s hitting?’

“I looked and saw that he was hitting furiously, his eyes were almost popping out of their sockets, and every time he himself received a blow it drew blood.

“ ‘Now work out for yourself what it does to him inside.’

“ ‘What do you mean “inside”?’ All I could see is that he was sitting straight, with his mouth wide open, quickly taking in air.

“My new friend said, ‘That’s what’s bad: his back is too big, the whole blow spreads over it; he’s hitting out hard, he’s gasping for breath, breathing with his mouth open, and the air will burn out all his innards.’

“ ‘Well, then, does that mean Chepkun is the better bet?’

“ ‘Certainly he’s a better bet: you can see he’s all dried up, just skin and bones; his back’s like a warped spade handle, it will never take the full force of a blow, just bits of it. And just look how steadily he gives it to Bakshei, taking his time, using his technique, not letting the whip bounce, letting it swell the skin. That’s why Bakshei’s back has swollen up and turned as blue as a cauldron, but there’s no blood, and all the pain is in his body; that’s why Chepkun’s back has skin like crackling and torn as a piglet’s back, so all his pain will melt in his blood, and he’ll thrash Bakshei to a standstill. Do you get it now?’

“ ‘I get it now,’ I said. In fact, I now immediately grasped all the Asiatic tactics and took a strong interest in the best approach to these contests.

“ ‘The main thing, really,’ my acquaintance pointed out, ‘is to notice how well that damned Chepkun keeps time with his face. You can see he hits out and then puts up with the answering blow, shutting his eyes to meet it. That’s easier than goggling, the way Bakshei does; Chepkun has gritted his teeth and bitten his lip, that also makes it easier, because by clamping up you don’t get too much burning inside you.’

“I made a mental note of all these curious facts and took a closer look at both Chepkun and Bakshei: I saw more and more clearly that Bakshei was bound to collapse, because his great big eyes had become completely glazed over and his lips seemed to be drawn apart by a string, so his teeth were entirely bared . . . In fact, as we watched, Bakshei gave Chepkun another twenty blows, each one weaker, and suddenly tumbled backward, letting go of Chepkun’s left hand, but still moving his right arm as if he were thrashing Chepkun. But he had fainted and now was completely unconscious. Then my friend said, ‘It’s over: that’s my twenty kopecks gone.’ Now all the Tatars started talking, congratulating Chepkun and shouting, ‘Hey, Chepkun Yemgurchei, chief, clever chief, you’ve thrashed Bakshei for good: sit down, the mare’s yours now.’

“Khan Jangar himself got off his felt rug and walked about, smacking his lips: he too said, ‘It’s yours, Chepkun, your mare: get on her, ride her, enjoy her.’

“Chepkun got to his feet: his back was streaming blood, but he showed no signs of pain, he put his gown and Cossack tunic over the mare and belly-flopped onto her, and that was how he rode off. I felt sad again.

“ ‘Now,’ I thought, ‘it’s all over and I’ve got to worry about the situation I’m in.’ The last thing I wanted to do was to think about that.

“Fortunately, my new friend told me, ‘Wait, don’t go. Something else is definitely going to happen.’

“ ‘What else can there be? It’s all over.’

“ ‘No, it’s not over: take a look, Khan Jangar is lighting his pipe. You see, he’s smoking: that means for certain he’s thinking about something else, something very Asiatic.’

“So I thought, ‘If it’s going to be the same sort of thing again, I shan’t fail to try my luck, as long as I can find a backer.’ ”

6

“And what do you suppose? It all turned out exactly as I wanted: Khan Jangar was smoking his pipe, and another Tatar boy was galloping toward him from a clearing in the forest, but this time the horse was not like the mare that Chepkun won from Bakshei in a fair contest, it was a dark dappled-bay colt and words cannot describe it. If you’ve ever seen a corncrake (in Oriol Province we call it a ‘jerker’) running along the edge of a field of grain, with its wings spread out but its tail, unlike that of every other bird, not spread in the air but hanging down, and tucking up its legs, as if it doesn’t need them, so that it really looks as if it’s riding on air—that was this new horse, like the bird, seeming to move along, propelled by some other force.

“It’s no exaggeration to say that it wasn’t even flying: only the amount of ground behind it seemed to increase. I had never ever seen such lightness and had no idea what price to put on this little horse, whom it was destined for, and for what treasures, what prince should have it, and even less did I ever think that this horse would be mine.”

“You mean to say it became yours?” the astonished listeners interrupted the storyteller.

“Yes, gentlemen, mine, lawfully mine, but just spare a minute, if you will, to listen to how that happened. The gentry behaved as usual, starting to outbid one another for this horse, too, and my remount officer—the man I had given the baby to—also got involved; but the gentry suddenly found their match in a Tatar called Savakirei, a runt of a man, but strong, willful, his head as round and firm as a cabbage and so closely shaved that it looked carved, his face as red as a carrot—he was like a fresh healthy specimen of a vegetable. He was yelling, ‘There’s no point emptying your pockets: anyone who wants can show their money, whatever the khan is asking, and then can thrash it out with me and see who gets the horse.’

“Naturally, this was not something the gentry could go in for, so they immediately stood aside. In any case, what hope had they of out-thrashing a Tatar? That pagan would have killed the lot of them. My remount officer was by now a little short of money too, because he’d lost at cards in Penza, yet again, but I could see he wanted the horse. So I got behind him and tugged at his sleeve, saying, among other things, ‘No need to overbid, just pay what the khan wants, and I’ll sit down with Savakirei for a thrashing contest.’ He was reluctant, but I persuaded him by saying, ‘Do it as a favor for me: I want to.’

“So that’s what we did.”

“Then did you and that Tatar . . . really thrash each other?”

“Yes, gentlemen: we had the same thrashing contest, and I got the colt.”

“So you won, and the Tatar lost?”

“I did, sir; it wasn’t easy, but I defeated him.”

“But the pain must have been horrible.”

“Mmm . . . how can I put it? Yes, at first it was, sir: even very painful, especially because I wasn’t used to it, while that Savakirei had the trick of hitting to make the skin swell but not let the blood flow. But I had my own cunning trick to counter his subtle technique: each time he lashed me, I’d jerk my back under the whip and managed to flay my own skin, which kept me safe, so that I thrashed Savakirei to death.”

“You thrashed him to death? You mean he really died?”

“Yes, sir: he was so stubborn and stupid that he kept up his tactics, so that was the end of him,” the narrator replied amiably and dispassionately; when he saw his listeners looking at him aghast, if not horrified, he seemed to sense that his story needed an explanation.

“You see,” he continued, “it was because of him, not me, because he was considered the best fighter in the whole of Ryn Sands, and because his pride made him determined not to let me win, he wanted to endure the pain like a hero and not be a disgrace to the Asiatic nation. But he collapsed, the poor soul, and I was too much for him, probably because I had a penny in my mouth. That’s a terrific help, and I kept biting on it so as not to feel the pain; and to distract my mind, I counted the lashes, so I was all right.”

“And how many lashes did you count?” came an interruption.

“I can’t rightly say, sir; I remember that I counted up to two hundred and eighty-two, and then I suddenly had something like a fainting fit, and I lost count for a moment, so I didn’t count my lashes, but very soon after that Savakirei waved his whip at me for the last time and failed to hit me: like a doll, he fell forward onto me. When they examined him, he was dead . . . Ugh, what a fool! To suffer all that and die! And I nearly ended up in jail because of him. The Tatars were no problem: if you’d killed someone, you’d killed them—the rules provided for that, because he could have thrashed me to death—but my own people, our Russians, don’t understand this, which is annoying: they went for me.

“ ‘What does that matter to you? Why do you have to butt in?’ I said.

“ ‘Why?’ they said. ‘You’ve killed an Asiatic, haven’t you?’

“ ‘So what if I killed him? It was by mutual consent. Would it have been better if he’d flogged me to death?’

“ ‘He could have flogged you to death and not have been punished, because he’s not a Christian, but you have to be judged by Christian laws. So off we go to the police.’

“Well, I thought, ‘Fine, brothers: you’ve got to catch me first.’ In my view, there’s nothing nastier than the police, so I immediately darted behind one Tatar, and then another, and whispered to them, ‘Save me, chiefs: you saw it all happened in an honest fight . . .’

“They crowded together, jostled me between them, and hid me.”

“What do you mean . . . how did they *hide* you?”

“I ran off with them all the way to their steppes.”

“As far as the steppes!”

“Yes, sir: to the Ryn Sands themselves.”

“Did you spend a long time there?”

“All of ten years: I was twenty-three when they got me to Ryn Sands and I ran away from there when I was thirty-three.”

“So did you like living in the steppes, or not?”

“No, sir. What is there to like? Sheer boredom, that’s all. But getting away earlier was impossible.”

“Why? Did the Tatars keep you in a pit or under guard?”

“No, sir: they’re kind people; they would never do anything so vile as to put me in a pit or in shackles. They just told me, ‘Be our friend, Ivan. We’re very fond of you, so live in the steppes and be useful to us: doctor our horses and help our women.’ ”

“Did you doctor the horses?”

“I did: I was a sort of medic for them, so I doctored them, their cattle, their horses and sheep, but mostly I treated their wives, the Tatar women.”

“Do you really know anything about medicine?”

“How can I put it? But what’s so difficult about it? Whatever the illness, I’d give the patient krantz aloe or galangal rhizome, and they’d get better. They had a lot of aloe—a Tatar went to Saratov and found a whole sack of it, which he brought; but before I came, they didn’t know what it was for.”

“Did you settle down with them?”

“No, sir: I was desperate to get back all the time.”

“Surely there must have been some way to escape?”

“No, sir, how could I? If my feet had stayed as they were, then I certainly would have been back in my home country a long time before.”

“But what happened to your feet?”

“After my first attempt, I was bristled.”

“What do you mean . . . Excuse us, please: we’re not sure what you mean when you say you were *bristled*.”

“That’s a very common trick of theirs: if they’re fond of somebody and want to keep him, but that person longs to or tries to get away, then they do this to stop him from going. So after my first attempt to run away, when I got lost, they caught me and told me, ‘Ivan, you know you have to be our friend and, to stop you leaving us again, it’s best if we cut your heels open and shove a little bit of bristle in the cut.’ So that’s how they ruined my feet: all the time I had to crawl on all fours.”

“Tell us, please, how they do this horrible operation.”

“It’s very simple, sir: ten of them threw me to the ground, telling me, ‘Scream, Ivan, scream as loud as you can when we start cutting you: it won’t hurt so much then.’ Then they sat on me and one of them who had the skill very swiftly cut open the skin on my soles and stuck some chopped horse’s mane in the wound and then folded back the skin and stitched it up with gut. After that, they kept me for a few days with my hands tied, they were afraid that I might interfere with the wound and make the bristle come out with the pus. But as soon as the skin healed, they let me go. ‘Now, Ivan, welcome: you’re our friend and you’ll never ever leave us.’

“As soon as I tried to get to my feet I collapsed onto the ground again: the chopped hair under the skin of my heel had grown in, and it hurt like death against the live flesh, so that there was no way I could stand on my feet, let alone take a step forward. I’ve never ever cried, but this time I sobbed out loud.

“ ‘What have you damned Asiatics done to me?’ I said. ‘It would have been better if you vipers had finished me off, rather than cripple me for the rest of my life so I can’t walk.’

“But all they said was, ‘Never mind, Ivan, why make such a fuss about nothing?’

“ ‘What do you mean “fuss about nothing”? You can’t ruin a man and expect him not to complain.’

“They told me, ‘You’ve got to learn the trick of not walking on your soles, you have to walk bowlegged on the side bones of your feet.’

“I thought what swine they were; I turned away from them and wouldn’t talk. I’d silently decided that it was better to die than follow their advice of walking bowlegged on my ankles. But after I’d spent endless time lying down and was bored out of my mind, I began to get the hang of it and gradually learned to waddle about on my ankles. The Tatars didn’t laugh at me in the least: they even said, ‘That’s right, you’re moving well, Ivan.’ ”

“What a misfortune. But how was it that you decided to leave and yet got caught?”

“It’s impossible, sir: the steppes are flat, there are no roads, and you get hungry . . . I walked for three days; I was as weak as a hungry fox, but caught a bird with my hands and ate it raw; but I got hungry again, and there was no water . . . How could you go on? So I collapsed, and they found me, took me back, and bristled me.”

One of the listeners, struck by this bristling, remarked that it must be extremely awkward to walk on

your ankles.

"At the beginning it was very bad indeed," Ivan Severianych replied, "and even later, when I got quite good at it, I couldn't walk far. On the other hand, those Tatars, I must admit, took great care of me after that.

" 'Now,' they said, 'it'll be hard for you, Ivan, you can't fetch water; it's difficult for you to cook anything. Listen, brother, take a Natasha: we'll give you a good Natasha, you choose any one you want.'

"I said, 'What's the point of choosing: they're all as good as each other. Give me the first you see.' So they married me off right away, no arguments."

"What? They married you to a Tatar girl?"

"Yes, sir. To a Tatar girl, of course. First they married me to the wife of Savakirei, the man I'd thrashed to death, only she didn't suit me: she was daft and seemed to be very afraid of me all the time, and she gave me no cheer at all. Perhaps she missed her husband or there was something on her mind. Well, people noticed that I was finding her heavy going, so they brought me another woman: she was a little girl, no more than thirteen . . . They told me, 'Take this Natasha too, Ivan: she'll be more fun.' So I did."

"Well then, was she actually more fun for you?" Ivan Severianych's listeners asked.

"Yes," he answered, "she turned out a bit more fun, only there were times when she cheered me up, and times when she annoyed me by fooling around."

"What did she do when she was fooling around?"

"Various things . . . The first thing that came into her head: she'd leap onto my knees, or when I was asleep she'd knock off my skullcap and throw it away somewhere and laugh. If you threatened her, she would burst out laughing and she'd start running around like a water nymph; well, walking on my ankles, I could never catch her, I'd just trip and end up laughing myself."

"When you were in the steppes, did you shave your head and wear a skullcap?"

"I did, sir."

"Why did you? Was it to please your wives, then?"

"No, sir, it was more for hygiene, because they don't have bathhouses there."

"So you had two wives at the same time, then?"

"Yes, in those steppes I had two, and then when I was with another khan, Agashimola, who kidnapped me from Otuchev, I was given two others."

"Tell me, if you don't mind," inquired one of the listeners, "how you could have been kidnapped."

"By trickery, sir. I'd run away with Chepkun Yemgurchei's Tatars and spent all those five years living in the Yemgurchei horde, but one day he had a celebration and all the princes and uhlans and princelings, big and small, came to see him, along with Khan Jangar and Bakshei Otuchev."

"The man whom Chepkun had thrashed?"

"Yes, sir, the same man."

"How can that be? Didn't Bakshei have a grudge against Chepkun?"

"Why should he?"

"For flogging him and getting the horse from him."

"No, sir, they don't hold grudges: if someone wins in a friendly contest, then he gets the prize and that's all there is to it. But Khan Jangar did once have a word with me and said, 'Oh, Ivan, you're a stupid fool: why did you sit down to a thrashing contest with Savakirei for the sake of a Russian prince: I would have had a good laugh if the Russian prince had taken off his own shirt.'

" 'You'd never live to see the day,' I answered.

" 'Why not?'

" 'Because our princes are cowards; they're not brave, and they have no strength to speak of.'

"He understood and said, 'I could see that there were no real horse lovers among them, and if they wanted to get something, then it would only be with money.'

" 'That's true,' I said. 'They can't do anything unless there's money in it.' As for Agashimola, he came from a distant horde; his horses grazed somewhere right by the Caspian Sea, and he liked to take medicine, so he wanted to summon me to treat his lady wife and promised Yemgurchei a lot of cattle in exchange. So Yemgurchei let me go to see him: I gathered a supply of aloe and galangal root and went. But as soon as Agashimola had taken me, he rushed off with all his nomads and we galloped away for eight days."

"So you were able to ride?"

"I rode, sir."

"How, with your feet?"

"What do you mean?"

"But what about the chopped horsehair in your heels, didn't it bother you?"

“Not at all: they’d thought that out cleverly. When they bristle you like that with hair, you can’t walk properly, but a bristled man rides a horse even better than anyone else, because he’s used to walking on his ankles and his legs form a wheel shape, so that he clings to the horse like a hoop, so tight that nothing can knock him off.”

“Well, what happened to you next when you were in different steppes, in Agashimola’s?”

“I was in even worse mortal peril.”

“But you didn’t perish?”

“No, sir, I didn’t.”

“Please go on, tell us what you had to put up with Agashimola.”

“If you like.”

7

“When Agashimola’s Tatars brought me to their camp, they rushed off to a new place and refused to let me go free.

“ ‘Ivan, why would you want to live with the Yemgurchei’s tribe? Yemgurchei is a thief: live with us; we’ll be happy to show you respect and we’ll give you good Natashas. You had only two Natashas with Yemgurchei, but we’ll give you more.’

“I refused. ‘Why would I want more? I don’t need any more.’

“ ‘No,’ they said, ‘you don’t understand: the more Natashas, the better; they’ll bring you more Nicholases and all the Nicholases will call you daddy.’

“ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘do you think it’s an easy task for me to bring up Tatar children? If there was anyone to baptize them and give them Communion, that would be a different matter, otherwise, it doesn’t matter how many I bring forth, they’ll still all be your people, they won’t be Orthodox, and they’ll grow up to cheat Russian peasants.’

“All the same, Agashimola, after kidnapping me from Otuchev, gave me two more wives. In his camp there was much more respect for Russians, and especially for one of our Russian women . . .”

“But how could they take a liking to one of our women? To judge by what you say, their own Natashas aren’t bad, are they?”

“She straightened their faith out for them and found a way of making their family relations much better.”

“How could she manage that, when their own women don’t have much to do with religion?”

“If you listen, I’ll tell you how it was. About five years before I arrived, a young widow from Piriatin ended up with them along with other captives. She was called Oksana, or as they still remember her in steppe fashion, Ksana-Khanum. Her body was very much to Agashimola’s taste, because their Natashas have rather withered figures, but Ksana had something like two good watermelons rolling about under her blouse, and below the waist you could see that there was a lot of pleasing flesh. Because of these generous endowments Agashimola ordered a small yurt to be put up for her next to the main yurt, and after he had said his evening prayers, he went to see her, full of ardent desire; she hadn’t been in the steppe long, but she had learned all the ways of doing things there and she met him, as their wives did, with a pair of scissors. I need to explain that they may have a lot of leeway as far as their womenfolk are concerned, but a man has to let his wife cut his nails before they can try the fruits of joy, so that they don’t indulge unreasonably often in these exercises. Otherwise, a man with no self-restraint would think of nothing but jumping from one woman to another, but not with them: you have to put up with abstinence until your nails grow back a bit. That was the reason Agashimola was so pleased that his nails were beginning to catch on things by the time that Ksana-Khanum arrived. She received him as their rules dictate, by bowing low, and then she took his right hand in hers and cut the nail on the little finger, and then the finger next to it; then she let go of his hand and lay down flirtatiously on the felt rug. She lay there on her side, wiggling her watermelons and looking at her master, furrowing her black eyebrows, while he stuck out a third finger and waited for all his nails to be cut. He wanted to touch her plump flanks, but his faith forbad him until she cut his nails.

“ ‘Finish cutting them, be quick,’ he whispered.

“ ‘No need to,’ murmured Ksana-Khanum.

“ ‘What do you mean “no need”? The Prophet himself commanded that before every act, a man’s nails have to be cut . . .’

“ ‘But I have cut your nails,’ said Ksana-Khanum, laughing.

“ ‘How about the rest?’

“ ‘Why bother about the rest? It wasn’t said, “Cut all the nails,” was it? If that were the law, I wouldn’t have left a single nail uncut, but there’s nothing about “cutting them all” in the command, so there’s no need to. In any case, there’s no need to be holier than the law. Your other nails will come in handy the next time.’

“Agashimola took a great liking to these words. But he was a very religious man and was firm about matters of the faith: he was a little afraid and, just to make sure, he asked the cunning woman, ‘All the same, do you think one can get away with cutting just one nail?’ She seemed to take offense at the idea of altering the Prophet’s holy will: in such a case, it would be one nail, not nails, that was cut, and you could be in a lot of trouble for such dishonorable behavior.

“By now Agashimola realized that his captive was well versed in the rules of the faith; he stopped arguing with her and enjoyed the fruits of joy in peace and calm. This amendment to the rules was just what he wanted. The next morning he summoned first his wives and then his adult sons and relatives, and informed them all how cleverly Ksana-Khanum had interpreted the rules of the faith. Everyone praised the Russian woman’s intelligence and sense, especially those who had young, agreeable wives. They brought her a lot of gifts and offerings and, thanks to her, they stopped being so bestial in their general treatment of Russians: now they admitted that there were Russians who could interpret the law.

“As for those who had older wives and uglier ones, not all of them dared to trust the new interpretation: such a man would dig his heels in if his wife cut only two or three nails, he would say he was afraid of putting his soul in mortal peril with this Russian innovation.

“At first, Agashimola was overjoyed, but later, when he had time to think, he added up all the fruits of joy that he had missed, for he was an elderly man when he met Ksana-Khanum and her correction: he had reduced his pleasures tenfold, and it was impossible to recuperate what he had missed. He even wept with frustration, then summoned the mullahs and teachers and hauled them over the coals for failing, despite their learning, to reveal what a simple woman from Piriatin had grasped.

“The mullahs didn’t argue. They themselves found the correction much improved their own domestic lives. They meekly endured his ranting, reminding him only that by the will of the blessed Prophet is the truth revealed to simple hearts, only over time, never instantly.

“So, once more, I took two wives, but not any more, because if you have a lot of women, even if they’re Tatars, pagan women quarrel and need constant disciplining.”

“Well, then, did you love these new wives of yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you love these new wives of yours?”

“Love? Is that what you mean? They were all right: one I had from Agashimola was a good housewife to me, so I quite . . . liked her.”

“How about the girl, the very young one that you used to have as a wife? I expect you liked her better, didn’t you?”

“So-so: I quite liked her, too.”

“I expect you missed her when you were kidnapped into another horde, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t actually miss her.”

“But you must have had children by those first wives.”

“Of course I did: Savakirei’s wife had two Nicholases and a Natasha, and the little girl gave birth to six in five years, because she had a couple of Nicholases at the same time.”

“But do you mind if we ask why you keep calling them Nicholases and Natashas?”

“That’s the Tatar way. Any grown-up Russian is an Ivan to them, and a woman is a Natasha, while the boys are called Nicholases; so my wives, even though they were Tatars, were counted as Russians because of me and called Natashas, and the boy children were Nicholases. Of course, all that’s just superficial, because the children had no churching, so I didn’t consider them to be my children.”

“How could you not consider them your own? Why on earth not?”

“But I couldn’t possibly consider them mine when they weren’t baptized or anointed.”

“What about your parental feelings?”

“What do you mean?”

“But surely you had some feelings for those children. Did you never show them any affection?”

“How could I? Of course, if I was sitting there on my own and one of them ran up, fine, I’d pat him on the head, stroke his hair, and say, ‘Go and see your mother.’ But that didn’t happen often, because I wasn’t interested in them.”

“But why not? Did you have a lot to do?”

“No, sir, I had nothing to do at all, I missed home badly and wanted to get back to Russia.”

“So even after ten years you didn’t get used to the steppes?”

“No, sir, you just want to get home . . . I got miserable. Especially in the evenings, or even when the weather’s good, in the middle of the day, it’s baking hot, the camp is quiet, and the Tatars feel the heat so badly they go to their tents and sleep, then I’d lift the flap in my tent and look at the steppe . . . first one direction, then the other, and it was the same wherever you looked . . . Sultry heat, cruel heat; open spaces with no boundary; grasses, wild winds; the white feather grasses, as thick as a silver sea, are swaying and you can smell them on the wind; there’s a stench of sheep, and everything’s bathed in burning sunlight, and the steppes are as tiresome as life: no end in sight, and the misery is bottomless . . . You look and don’t know where you’re looking, and suddenly you see the shape of a monastery before your eyes, and you remember Christian country and you burst into tears.”

Ivan Severianych stopped: his memories made him heave a deep sigh. Then he went on: “In fact, it was even worse on the salt marshes by the Caspian Sea: the sun turns red, it bakes you, and the salt marsh is shining, so is the sea . . . The shining makes your head spin even worse than the feather grass does, and you don’t know where, in what part of the world, to place yourself, whether you’re alive or dead and being tormented for your sins in a hopeless hell. When there’s some feather grass growing on the steppe, it is a bit less miserable; at least there’s the blue of the sage bushes here and there in the gullies, or there’s some dwarf wormwood and white patches of savory; but in the salt marshes there’s nothing but blinding light . . . Occasionally you get grass fires sweeping along, and that stirs things up: bustards, big and little, steppe sandpipers take to the air, and the Tatars start hunting them. We used to drive the bustards on horseback and kill them by lashing them with long whips; but, if you’re not careful, you find yourself galloping away to escape the fire . . . That’s all the fun you can have. Then wild strawberries start pushing up through the burned ground, various birds fly down, mostly small ones, and the air is filled with chirruping . . . Occasionally you come across a bush: steppe birch, wild peach, or yellow acacia . . . When the sun rose and the mist condensed into dew, you felt a breath of coolness and scents coming from the plants . . . Of course, it was still dreary, but at least it was bearable. But God forbid anyone has to spend time in the salt marshes. Horses might quite like it for a while: they can lick the salt and drink their fill and put on weight, but it’s deadly for a human being. There’s not even a living animal there, there’s just one ridiculous little bird, the pratincole, something like our swallow, nothing notable about it, except a red fringe around its mouth. I don’t know why it comes to those shores; there’s nothing to perch on, so it lands on the salt marsh, lies on its butt for a while, then any moment it will gather its wits and fly off again, and you are deprived even of this, since you have no wings and you’re back on your own, no death, no life, no repentance, and when you die, you’ll be like a piece of mutton, covered in salt, and you’ll lie there, salt meat until the end of the world. But life is even more sickening in winter when the grazing is covered with snow: there isn’t much snow, just enough to cover the grass and make it as hard as wood. That’s when the Tatars stay in their yurts, sitting by the fire, smoking . . . They often get so bored that they thrash each other. Then you go outside and there’s nothing to look at: the horses hunch their backs and move about all huddled, they’re so thin that only their tails and manes move in the wind. The most they can do is move their legs and scrape away the covering of snow with their hooves, to nibble at the frozen grass, which is their only food: that’s what winter grazing is all about . . . It’s unbearable. Your only distraction is when you notice a horse is too weak to graze, it can’t get its hoof through the snow and its teeth around a frozen root. Horses like that have a knife thrust through their throat, then they’re flayed and the meat is eaten. But it’s really vile meat—sweet, rather like a cow’s udder, but tough—you eat it because you have nothing else, but it makes you feel sick. I was lucky: one of my wives knew how to smoke horse ribs: she’d take a horse rib, with meat on either side, put it into a big intestine, and smoke it over the fire. That was all right, more edible, because at least it smelled like ham, but the taste was still foul. And you gnaw at this horrible stuff and you suddenly think: Oh, now, at home in our village, ducks and geese are being plucked, pigs are being slaughtered, really fatty cabbage soup with pork neck is cooking for the holidays, and Father Ilia, our priest, a really nice, kind old man, will soon go to celebrate Christmas, taking the sextons, the priests’ wives and the sextons’ wives, and the student priests, all of them a bit tipsy. But Father Ilia can’t take a lot of drink: the butler in the master’s house will offer him a glass of vodka, and the manager and nanny in the office will send him out something, then Father Ilia will be so weak that he’ll have to crawl to see us in the yard, so drunk he can barely move one leg after the other: in the first peasant hut he comes to, he might be able to swallow a glass of vodka, but not in the next huts. Then he’ll pour whatever he’s offered into a bottle under his cassock. So he always makes himself at home, even when it’s a matter of food, because if he sees something really nice to eat, he’ll ask, ‘Wrap it up in newspaper, then give it to me, and I’ll take it with me.’ Usually, we would tell him, ‘Father, we don’t have any newspaper.’ He wouldn’t be annoyed, he’d just take it unwrapped and give it to his wife, and happily go on to whatever’s next. Oh, gentlemen, when you have memories of such a fine life, ever since childhood, it weighs on your soul, it makes you

sick with longing, you realize you've lost all that happiness and, no matter how long you live, you'll never be properly married, and you'll die with nobody to give you a funeral, and you're plunged into misery . . . and you wait until it's night, leave the yurt on the sly, so that your wives and your children can't see you, and you start praying . . . and praying . . . and praying, so that the snow under your knees thaws and the next morning you see grass where your tears fell."

The narrator broke off his story; his head drooped. Nobody disturbed him; everyone seemed to be imbued with respect for the sacred grief in his recollections. After a minute, however, Ivan Severianych sighed, as if dismissing all this. He took his monk's cowl off his head, crossed himself, and said, "But it all passed, thank God!"

We let him take a short break, then were rude enough to ask him more questions: How had he, the enchanted warrior, mended his heels, ruined by the chopped horsehair, and how had he found his way through the Tatar steppes to escape his Natashas and Nicholases and end up in a monastery?

Our curiosity was satisfied by Ivan Severianych's utter frankness, something he was evidently quite unable to suppress.

8

We were so interested in Ivan Severianych's story that we wanted to hear it in full: we asked him to tell us first what extraordinary methods he used to rid himself of the bristles and flee captivity. This is what he had to say:

"I despaired completely of ever getting back home and seeing my fatherland. Even thinking about it was beyond me, and I was beginning to long for death. I was living with no more feelings than a statue, yet I sometimes wondered about Father Ilia in our church at home, the one who kept asking for pieces of newspaper, praying at services for 'those who sail the seas and travel the land, who suffer and who are captives.' When I listened to that I used to think, 'Why? Is there a war going on that we have to pray for captives?' But now I understood why captives are prayed for, but I couldn't understand why these prayers brought me no benefit. I'm not an unbeliever, to say the least, but I was put out and wouldn't pray myself. 'Why should I pray,' I thought, 'when nothing comes of it?'

"One day, though, I suddenly caught wind of something: the Tatars were stirred up. I asked them, 'What's happening?'

" 'It's nothing,' they said, 'two mullahs have arrived from your parts; they've got documents from the White Tsar and they're traveling far and wide to spread their faith.'

"I eagerly asked where they were. They pointed out a yurt to me. When I got there I saw a lot of princelings big and small, imams, and dervishes gathered, sitting with their legs tucked under them on felt rugs, and in the center were two strangers wearing traveling clothes, though obviously both clergymen. They were standing surrounded by this mob, preaching the word of God to the Tatars.

"The moment I saw them I was overjoyed at seeing Russians: my heart quivered, and I fell at their feet, sobbing. They were just as overjoyed by my greeting: both exclaimed, 'Well? Well? Do you see how divine grace works? It's just descended on one of your people, and he has rejected Muhammad!'

"The Tatars replied that no grace had descended, that I was one of theirs, a Russian, Ivan, living here as a captive.

"The missionaries didn't like the sound of that. They didn't believe I was a Russian. I stood up for myself. 'No,' I said, 'I really am a Russian. Holy fathers, have mercy, get me out of here! I've been languishing as a prisoner here for eleven years, and you can see how I've been crippled: I can't walk.'

"But they paid not the slightest attention to my words; they turned away and went on with what they'd been doing, preaching.

"I thought, 'Well, what's the point of grumbling: they have a job to do and perhaps it's a bad idea for them to treat me differently in front of the Tatars.' So I stopped pleading with them and chose a time when they were alone in their separate camp; then I flung myself at them and told them everything, fully and frankly, that I was suffering the most cruel fate. I asked them, 'Holy fathers, my saviors, frighten the Tatars by mentioning the White Tsar; tell them that he forbids Asiatics to hold his subjects captive, or, even better, pay a ransom, then I'll work as your servant. Living here I've learned to speak Tatar really well and I can be a useful person for you.'

"They replied, 'Son, what are you saying? We don't have ransom money, and we're not allowed to try to frighten infidels, because they're already a cunning and treacherous lot, and so it's politic for us to watch our manners in dealing with them.'

" 'Does that mean,' I asked, 'that because of your politics I have to spend the rest of my useless life here

with them?'

" 'Well, does it matter, son, where you spend your useless life? Pray: God is very merciful and perhaps he will save you.'

" 'I have been praying, but I've got no more strength and I've lost all hope.'

" 'Do not despair,' they said. 'Desperation is a great sin.'

" 'I'm not despairing, it's just that . . . how can you be like that? I find it very hurtful that you, Russians and fellow countrymen, are refusing to help me.'

" 'No, child,' they replied. 'Don't involve us in this. We are in Christ, and in Christ there is neither Hellene nor Jew: our countrymen are all obedient novitiates. For us, everyone is equal, everyone is equal.'

" 'Everyone?' I queried.

" 'Everyone. That is what we have learned from the apostle Paul. Wherever we go, we never quarrel . . . that would be unbefitting. You are a slave; there's nothing to be done, so endure, for even the apostle Paul says that slaves must submit. But remember that you are a Christian, and so we need not intercede for your soul; you don't need us to open the gates of paradise, but these people will be in darkness if we don't bring them into the fold, so we are bound to intercede for them.'

"Then they showed me a book. 'See how many people we have recorded in this register: they're all the people we have brought to join our faith!' I stopped even talking to them; I never saw them again, except for one of them, and that was by chance. My little son came galloping up once and said, 'Daddy, there's someone lying on the lake bed.'

"I went to take a look: I saw that the skin had been pulled off from his knees downward like stockings, and from his elbows to his hands like gloves: the Tatars are very good at that—they cut around the limb and then pull to remove the skin. The man's head was lying by his side: a cross was carved into his forehead.

" 'Oh dear,' I thought, 'you wouldn't intercede for me, your fellow countryman, and I held that against you, but now you've proved worthy of a crown of sorrows. Forgive me now, for Christ's sake!'

"So I made the sign of the cross over him there and then; I placed his head next to his body, bowed to the ground, and buried him, then I sang 'Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us' over his grave. But I have no idea what happened to the other man, his comrade; probably he ended up the same way, with a crown of sorrows, because later on, the Tatar women in the horde got hold of a great number of pictures of the saints, the same pictures that those missionaries had."

"And do these missionaries get as far as Ryn Sands?"

"They do, of course, but no good ever comes of it."

"Why not?"

"They don't know how to conduct themselves. If you're going to convert an Asiatic, you have to make him afraid, make him tremble all over from fear, but they preach a humble God. That's useless from the very start, because Asiatics, if they're not threatened, will never respect a humble God: they'll beat up the preachers."

"But I suppose that the main thing is that you mustn't have any money or valuables when you go to see Asiatics."

"No, sir, you mustn't, although they still won't believe that someone could come without bringing something; they'll think that you've buried it somewhere in the steppes and will force you to tell them, they'll torture you to death."

"What thugs!"

"Yes, indeed: I witnessed what happened to a Jew. An old Jew came from God knows where, and he talked about religion too. He was a good man and you could see he was a true believer, though his clothes were nothing but rags, so you could see bare flesh: when he started talking about his faith, you'd think that nobody could tire of listening. At the very beginning I started arguing with him, asking him what sort of religion his was, when he had no saints, but he said, 'We do have saints,' and he began to read from the Talmud about the saints they had . . . it was very interesting. They say the Talmud was written by the rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who was so learned that sinners couldn't look at him: the moment they looked, they all fell down dead, and that was why God summoned him personally and told him, 'Listen, learned rabbi Joshua ben Levi, it's good that you're such a scholar, but what's bad is that all my Jews could die because of you. That's not what I intended when I had Moses bring them across the desert and the sea. So you have to leave your fatherland and live where nobody can see you.' When Joshua ben Levi departed, he ended up in the place where paradise was, and he buried himself up to the neck in sand and spent thirteen years like that; even though he was buried up to the neck, he had a lamb every Saturday, which was roasted with fire that came down from heaven. Any mosquito or fly that landed on

his nose to drink his blood was instantly consumed by heavenly fire . . . The Asiatics loved the story of the learned rabbi, so they listened at length to this Jew, but then they surrounded him and started interrogating him about where he had buried his money when he came to see them. Gentlemen, the Jew swore that he had no money, that God had sent him empty-handed, with nothing but his wisdom; but they wouldn't believe him, and they raked up the coals from their campfire, spread a horse's skin over the burning ashes, laid him on it, and began shaking the skin. 'Tell us, tell us, where is the money?' When they saw that he'd turned quite black and had fallen silent, they said, 'Wait, let's bury him up to the throat in sand: perhaps that'll bring him around.'

"So they buried him in sand, but the Jew died, even though he'd been buried in sand, and for a long time you could see his blackened head sticking out of the sand. The children were scared by it, so the Tatars cut it off and threw it down a dried-up well."

"That's what comes of preaching to them!"

"Yes, sir, it's very difficult, but the Jew did have some money after all."

"Really?"

"Really. The wolves and jackals started worrying the body and dragging bits of it all over the sands, and finally they got to his shoes. They shredded his old boots, and seven rubles fell out one of the soles. The Tatars found them later."

"But how did you get away from them yourself?"

"I was saved by a miracle."

"Who performed the miracle that saved you?"

"Talafa."

"Who is this Talafa, another Tatar?"

"No, sir, quite another breed, an Indian; no ordinary Indian, but one of their gods that comes down to earth."

At the request of his audience, Ivan Severianych Fliagin told them about the next act of his life's tragicomedy.

9

"Almost a year passed after the Tatars got rid of the missionaries, and it was winter again: we herded the horses a bit farther south, toward the Caspian Sea, for winter grazing. One day two men, if you can call them men, suddenly came upon us. God knows who they were, where they came from, or what their race or calling was. They didn't really have a proper language; it wasn't Russian or Tatar, they pronounced a word in Russian, then one in Tatar, and to each other they spoke in gibberish. Neither of them was old; one was very dark, with a big beard, wearing a gown that made him look like a Tatar, except that his gown wasn't of many colors but all red, and he wore a conical Persian hat; the other man was redheaded and also wore a gown, but it was patchwork, and he had lots of little boxes on him—whenever he was sure that nobody was looking, he'd take off his gown and go about in a jacket and trousers. The jacket and trousers looked as if they were tailored in German workshops in Russia. And he kept poking about, sorting things in those little boxes: what was in them, the devil alone knows. They said they'd come from Khiva to buy horses and that they intended to fight a war with one of their neighbors there, they didn't say with whom, but they kept trying to rouse the Tatars against the Russians. The redhead couldn't say very much, the only word of Russian he could get out was something like 'commahndah' and then he would spit. But neither had any money on them, because, as Asiatics, they knew that if you came to the steppes with money, you'd be a headless corpse when you left. They were trying to induce our Tatars to herd horses over to the newcomers' river, the Oxus, and settle up only after driving them there. The Tatars were of two minds whether to agree to this or not. They pondered and pondered, as if they were about to dig a gold mine, but clearly they were afraid of something.

"The newcomers tried to persuade them gently, but later they also tried to frighten them. 'Drive your horses,' they said, 'or things may go badly for you: we have our god Talafa, and he has sent his fire with us. God forbid that he should be angry.'

"The Tatars had never heard of this god; they were pretty sure that he and his fire couldn't hurt them in the steppes in winter. But the black-bearded man from Khiva, the one in the red gown, said that if they had any doubts, that very night Talafa would show them his power. 'But,' he said, 'if you see or hear anything, don't poke your nose outside, or he'll burn you up.' Of course, in the boredom of the steppes in winter, everyone found this wonderfully interesting, and although we were all a little afraid of this miracle, we were happy to watch and see what this Indian god would amount to, how he would reveal

himself, and what wonders he'd perform.

"My wives, children, and I all gathered early in the yurt, and we waited . . . Everything was dark and quiet, as it was every night, but just as we were going to sleep, I heard something like a blizzard hissing and flapping in the steppe; I seemed to be dreaming that sparks were flying down from the sky.

"I shook myself awake and saw my wives were tossing and turning and the children started crying. I said, 'Shush, stuff their mouths; they can suck, but they're not to cry.'

"They started sucking their thumbs, and everything was quiet again; but suddenly flames hissed again high up over the dark steppe . . . after the hiss, there was another explosion . . . 'Well,' I thought, 'I can see that Talafa's no joke after all.'

"Talafa hissed again shortly afterward, but this time quite differently, like a firebird soaring up with its tail on fire, and the fire was strange, bloodred; it exploded and became all yellow and then blue.

"I could hear that everything in the Tatar camp had gone dead. Everyone, of course, must have heard all this firing and shooting, but they must all have been petrified as they lay under their sheepskins. You could hear nothing but the ground shaking and quaking again and again. You can imagine all the horses were jumping about and crowding together, and at one point you could hear these Khivans or Indians run off somewhere, before another lot of fires snaked over the steppes . . . This made the horses whinny with horror and bolt . . . The Tatars forgot everything, even their fear; they all went galloping off, shaking their heads violently, yelling, 'Allah, Allah!' as they chased after the horses, while the Khivans just vanished without a trace, except for a box they'd left behind to remember them by . . . Since every single one of our Tatar warriors had rushed off after the herd of horses, and only the women and old men were left in the camp, I dared to take a look and see what was in the box. I found various sorts of earth, some medicines, and cardboard tubes: I took one of the tubes closer to the campfire so that I could examine it; it just exploded and the fire nearly burned out both of my eyes; then it flew up and went bang in the sky, before it exploded into stars . . . 'Aha,' I thought, 'this can't be a god; these are just fireworks, the same as they set off in the public gardens in our parts.' Then I set off another bang with a cardboard tube and I watched the old Tatars who were still there throw themselves to the ground, lying on their backs wherever they landed, their legs jerking . . . To begin with, I felt scared, but when I saw them convulsing like that, my mood changed completely: for the first time since I'd been taken captive, I gnashed my teeth noisily and loudly pronounced the first odd words that came into my head. I shouted as loud as I could, '*Parlez-bien-comme-ça-chéri-mir verflüchter-mein-Monsieur*!'

"Then I let off a Catherine wheel . . . When they saw this spinning fire moving about, they all froze with horror . . . The fire went out, but they stayed lying there; the most anyone could do was to raise his head, then drop his face again onto the ground, just waving a finger to get me to approach. I went up to him and said, 'Well then? You might as well admit it, you damned heathen: death or life?' I could see that they were now terribly afraid of me.

" 'Ivan, forgive us,' they said. 'Don't kill us, let us live.' In other places too, the rest of them waved their hands in the same way, begging for forgiveness and for their lives. I could see that I had the upper hand: I had certainly suffered long enough for all my sins. So I prayed: 'Most Holy Queen of Heaven, and Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, my beloved, my sweet, help me, O protectors!' But I was hard on the Tatars; I asked them, 'For what, and why should I forgive you and let you live?'

" 'Forgive us,' they said, 'for not believing in your God.'

" 'Aha,' I thought, 'so I really have scared them.' I told them, 'Don't even think about it, brothers: you're talking rubbish. I'll never ever forgive you for going against religion.' Then I gnashed my teeth loudly again and unwrapped another cardboard tube. It turned out to be a rocket . . . Terrible flames and bangs.

"I shouted at the Tatars, 'In one minute I'll destroy the lot of you if you refuse to believe in my God.'

" 'Don't destroy us,' they answered. 'We agree to submit to your God.'

"So I stopped setting off fireworks and I baptized them in a little stream."

"Did you baptize them right there and then?"

"There and then, sir. What point would there have been in delaying? They couldn't be allowed time to think about it. I wetted their heads with water over a hole in the ice, recited 'In the name of the Father and the Son,' and put the crosses that the missionaries had abandoned around their necks and told them that they had to treat the murdered missionary as a martyr and pray for him, then I showed them his grave."

"Did they pray for him?"

"They did, sir."

"But I don't suppose they knew any Christian prayers, or did you teach them?"

"No, I didn't have time to teach them, because I could see it was now time for me to make a getaway,

so I ordered them to pray the same way as they had prayed before, but not to dare mention Allah, but to use the name of Jesus Christ instead. So that's how they accepted their new faith."

"All the same, how did you run away from these Christian converts with your crippled feet, and how did you get cured?"

"Later I found some caustic chemical in those fireworks: your body had only to touch it and it burned you terribly. So I applied it and pretended that I was ill; I lay under a felt rug and rubbed this caustic chemical into my heels, and in two weeks I'd rubbed it in so well that the flesh on my feet rotted away and all the bristles that the Tatars had stuffed in ten years earlier came out with the pus. I pulled myself together as fast as I could, but hid what I was doing: I pretended that I was even more ill and instructed the women and old men to pray for me as hard as they could, because I was dying. I imposed a penance on them: they had to fast and not leave their yurts for three days; to make sure they were really terrified, I let off the biggest firework and then ran away . . ."

"And they didn't catch up with you?"

"No, how could they? I had left them so starving and frightened that they were perfectly happy not to poke their noses out of their yurts for three days; when they did take a look, I had gotten too far away to search for. After I'd removed the bristles, my feet weren't swollen anymore and I was so fleet of foot that I ran like mad across the whole steppes."

"And all that on foot?"

"How else? There are no roads there, you don't meet anybody, and if you did, you wouldn't be glad to see them. After three days a Chuvash did appear, he was on his own, herding five horses, and said to me, 'Ride!'

"I was wary: I wouldn't get on his horse."

"What were you afraid of?"

"I just was . . . he seemed an infidel, and what's more, you couldn't tell what his religion was, and in the steppes it's frightening if you don't know that much. But the idiot kept shouting, 'Ride. It's more fun if we ride together.'

"I said, 'Who are you, then? Maybe you don't have a god.'

" 'How can you say that? Only Tatars don't have a god; they eat horseflesh, but I have gods.'

" 'Who is your god?'

" 'Everything is god to me: the sun is god, the moon is god, the stars are god . . . everything is god. How can you say I have no god?'

" 'All those! Hmm . . . you say all those are your gods. How about Jesus Christ, does that mean he's not one of your gods?'

" 'Of course he's god, too, so are the Virgin Mary and Nicholas . . .'

" 'Which Nicholas?'

" 'There's one for winter, and one for summer.'

"I praised him for respecting Russia's Nicholas the Wonderworker. 'Always worship him, because he's Russian,' I said. I was on the point of approving of his religion when, thank God, he blurted everything out: 'Of course I worship Nicholas: I might not worship him in winter, but in summer, yes, I give him twenty kopecks for looking after my cows. But I don't rely just on him, I sacrifice a bullock to our ancestral spirit Keremet.'

"Naturally, I got angry. 'How dare you not rely on Nicholas the Wonderworker and give him, a Russian, just twenty kopecks, when you give your foul Mordovian Keremet a whole bullock? Clear off,' I said, 'I don't want your company . . . I'm not traveling with you if you don't respect Nicholas the Wonderworker.'

"So I didn't get a ride; I strode on as fast as I could, I didn't stop to think, and by the evening of the third day I began to imagine I could see water and people. As a precaution, I lay down on the grass and looked hard. Who were these people? Because I was afraid of being a prisoner in even worse conditions. But I could see these people were cooking food in pans . . . They must be Christians, I thought. I crawled up closer: I saw that they were crossing themselves and drinking vodka—so they were Russians! So I leaped up out of the grass and made myself known. It turned out they were a gang of fishermen. They treated me very kindly, as a fellow countryman, and said, 'Have some vodka!'

" 'I answered, 'Brothers, I've been living with Tatars and have completely lost the habit.'

" 'Never mind, we're your people here; you can get back into the habit. Drink up!'

"I poured myself a glass, thinking, 'Well then, may the Lord bless my return!'

" 'Have another drink!' they told me, 'You can see what a weakling not drinking has made you.'

"I allowed myself one more vodka and that loosened my tongue. I told them everything: where I came from, where I'd been. I spent the whole night sitting by the fire, drinking vodka and talking, and I was so

overjoyed to be back in holy Russia. It was only just before dawn, when the fire started to go out and nearly all my listeners had gone to sleep, that one of them, a member of the gang, asked me, 'Do you have papers?'

"I told him, 'No, I don't.'

" 'If you don't, then it's prison for you here.'

" 'In that case, I'll stay with you; I suppose I don't need papers to live here, do I?'

"He replied, 'You can live with us without papers, but you can't die.'

" 'Why's that,' I asked.

" 'Well, how can a priest register you if you don't have papers?'

" 'What will happen to me, in that case?'

" 'We'll throw you into the water to feed the fishes.'

" 'Without clergy?'

" 'Without clergy.'

"I wasn't quite sober, so I was horribly frightened by this; I began to weep and complain, but the fisherman laughed. 'I was making fun of you,' he said. 'Go ahead and die, we'll bury you in mother earth.'

"By now, however, I'd taken offense. I said, 'A nice joke. If you're going to make fun of me like that, I won't survive until spring.'

"As soon as this last fisherman fell asleep, I quickly got up and left; I went to Astrakhan, earned a ruble as a day laborer, and then started drinking so hard that I can't remember how I found myself in another town, in jail, from where I was sent under escort to my own province. I was brought to our town, thrashed at the police station, and delivered to my masters' estate. The countess who had ordered me to be flogged for hacking off the cat's tail had died in the meantime, but the count was still alive: he had aged greatly and become very pious and was no longer a horse lover. When he was told of my arrival, he remembered me and ordered me to be thrashed again, at home, and then to be taken to Father Ilia for confession. Well, I was flogged in the traditional way, in the estate office, then I went to see Father Ilia: he heard my confession and banned me from Holy Communion for three years.

"I said to him, 'But Father, why, I thought . . . after so many years without Communion . . . I was expecting . . .'

" 'I don't care what you were expecting,' he said. 'Why did you have Tatar women instead of wives? You do realize that I'm being merciful by merely banning you from Holy Communion, but if I treated you as the holy fathers decreed, then I'd have to burn all your clothes on your living body. But you needn't fear that, because police rules today forbid it.'

" 'Well then,' I thought, 'what can I do? I'll leave it at that, without Communion, I'll stay at home and recover from my captivity.' But the count wasn't having that. He announced, 'I won't have anyone excommunicated near me.' The manager was ordered to flog me again, this time publicly, as an example to everyone, and then to send me away as a peasant who'd pay quitrent.

"That was done: this time I was flogged in a new way, on the porch in front of the office, in the presence of all the serfs, and I was given papers. I felt very buoyant—after so many years I was a totally free man with legitimate papers—so I left. I had no definite plans, but God granted me a profession."

"What profession?"

"The same as before: working with horses. I started as a penniless nobody, and very soon I found myself well off. I could have done even better for myself, except for one thing."

"What was that thing, if I may ask?"

"I'd become badly possessed by various spirits and passions and also by something very inappropriate."

"What do you mean, 'possessed by something inappropriate'?"

"Magnetism, sir."

"What? Magnetism?"

"Yes, sir, the magnetic influence of a certain person."

"How did this person's influence manifest itself on you?"

"Someone else's will was acting in me, and I was fulfilling someone else's destiny."

"So was that when *your* personal perdition came upon you, after which you decided that you had to carry out your mother's vow and you went into a monastery?"

"No, sir, that happened later, but in the meantime I had a lot of various other adventures, before I came to my present convictions."

"Can you tell us about these adventures, too?"

"Why not, sir, with the greatest pleasure."

"Please go ahead, then."

“Once I had my papers, I left with no idea what I was going to do: I arrived at a fair and saw a Gypsy exchanging horses with a peasant and cheating him shamelessly. The Gypsy started testing the horses’ strength: he harnessed his own horse to a wagon carrying millet, and the peasant’s horse to a wagon of apples. Of course, the wagons’ draft was identical, but the peasant’s horse broke into a sweat, because it was overcome by the smell of the apples, a smell that horses find terribly unpleasant, while I could also see that the Gypsy’s horse was inclined to fits, because it had a burn mark on his forehead, which the Gypsy said was a wart. Naturally, I felt sorry for the peasant, because he wouldn’t be able to work with a horse that had fits: it would just topple over, and that would be that. In any case I had a deadly loathing for Gypsies because the first Gypsies I met had tempted me to become a tramp, and also, I could probably foresee what was to come, fears that came true. I told the peasant about the fake wart on the horse, and when the Gypsy started arguing with me, saying that it was a wart, not a burn mark on the horse’s head, I proved I was right by poking a hairpin into the horse’s kidneys, which made it collapse to the ground and writhe. I got the peasant a good horse by using my knowledge to choose one; he gave me twenty kopecks, something to eat, and vodka, so we went on a big spree. That was just the start: making myself a tidy sum, then drinking hard. Before a month had passed, I found this a good life: I hung horse brasses and a farrier’s tack all over my clothes and began touring the fairs and markets; wherever I went, I would give poor people guidance and make myself quite a lot of money: all my tips I spent on drink. Meanwhile I had become the scourge of God for all the profiteering Gypsies; I heard a rumor that they meant to beat me up. I began to avoid them, since there were a lot of them and I was alone. So the Gypsies never could catch me on my own and give me a proper thrashing; they wouldn’t dare do that when there were peasants around, because the peasants always stood up for me as a virtuous man. So the Gypsies spread nasty rumors about me, saying I was a sorcerer and my knowledge of animals came from the devil, but of course that was all nonsense. As I’ve told you, I have the gift and I’d be happy to teach it to anyone who wanted, but that’s the crucial thing: it wouldn’t be of use to anyone else.”

“Why wouldn’t it be of any use?”

“Nobody, sir, could grasp it, because it’s essential to have a natural gift; I’ve had the experience several times of trying to teach it and finding it was pointless. But let me tell you about that later.

“When I became famous in all the markets and fairs for seeing right through a horse, a remount officer, a prince, offered me a hundred rubles. ‘Listen, my good fellow,’ he said. ‘Let me into your secret for understanding horses. It’s of great value to me.’

“I told him, ‘I don’t have any secret: I have a natural gift for it.’

“But he wouldn’t back down. ‘But tell me how you understand these things. And here’s a hundred rubles, in case you might think I want it for nothing . . .’

“What could I do? I shrugged, wrapped the money in a piece of cloth, and told him, ‘All right, then, I’ll tell you what I know, and you can study and listen. But if you don’t master it and you don’t benefit at all, I’m not answerable.’

“That was enough to satisfy him. ‘Well, it’s no skin off your nose whether I master it or not, just talk.’

“ ‘The most important thing,’ I said, ‘is that if you want to know about a horse, what it’s really like, you have to choose the right place to stand when you examine it and never leave the place where you’re standing. Your first inspection has to be an intelligent look at the head and then a survey of the whole horse right to the tail; you mustn’t rush things the way officers do. An officer touches the horse’s neck, its forelock, its muzzle, the trim of its hoof, the knob on the top of its sternum, whatever’s to hand, and it’s all pointless. All that fussing and fiddling is why horse traders are so fond of cavalry officers. The moment a horse trader sees a hotfoot military man, he’ll start spinning the horse around him, twisting and turning it in every direction, but he’ll do his best not to show any part he doesn’t want shown, and that’s where the trickery is, and there are a lot of ways of tricking people: the horse might be lop-eared, so they cut out a few inches of skin on his neck, pull and stitch the skin together, smear something over it, and that makes it prick up its ears, but not for long: the skin slackens, the ears flop. If the ears are too big, they cut them and insert cones to make the ears stick up straight. If someone is looking for a matching pair of horses, and one horse has, say, a star on its forehead, the traders will make sure that another horse has a star: they use pumice or a hot baked turnip to rub away the hair to make new hair grow white where a star should be; that works, but if you take a careful look, you’ll see that the new hair is always a little longer than the real hair and sticks out like a beard. Horse traders do even worse things to cheat people: a horse might have hollows above the eyes, which looks bad, so the traders pierce the skin with a needle, put their lips to the wound and blow air into it to raise the skin and make the eye seem brighter, which looks much better. That’s easy to do, because horses like their eyes being breathed

on: warm breath is pleasant to a horse, and it will stand stock-still, but the air will leak out and it will have pits over its eyes again. There's a way of detecting this: feel around the socket to see if air is coming out. What is even funnier is selling blind horses. That can be a real comedy. For example, your officer creeps up to the horse's eye with a straw, to test if the horse can see the straw, but he doesn't notice the trader punching the horse in the belly or under its flank to make it shake its head at the same time. Another trader might just watch quietly, but he keeps a nail in his glove and pricks the horse while pretending to stroke it.'

"I explained ten times more than what I've just mentioned to this remount officer, but he didn't benefit from any of it. The very next day I saw him buy a whole lot of horses, each nag worse than the other, and yet he calls on me to take a look and says, 'Well, my good fellow, see how amazingly good I've got at understanding horses.'

"I took one look, laughed, and told him that there was nothing worth looking at. 'This horse's shoulders are too meaty, his legs will get caught in the earth; this horse puts his hooves under his belly when he lies down, and the pressure will give him a hernia before the year is out; this horse stamps its front leg and bangs its knee on the manger when it eats oats.' So I found fault with all his purchases, and I turned out to be utterly right.

"The next day the prince admitted, 'No, Ivan, you're right: I'll never grasp your gift; instead, why don't you work for me as a connoisseur and choose the horses, while I just pay the money?'

"I agreed and for three whole years I had an excellent life, not as a slave or hired man but more as a friend and assistant; if I hadn't been overcome by my benders, I might even have saved up a tidy sum, because if you work for a remount officer, whenever a horse breeder turns up, he has to meet the remount officer in person but at the same time send someone he trusts to the connoisseur to curry as much favor as possible, because all the breeders know that real power lies with whoever has a proper connoisseur on his side, not with the remount officer. But, as I've told you, I'm a born connoisseur, and I took a conscientious view of this gift of nature: I would never under any circumstances cheat anyone I worked for. My prince knew this and he gave me a lot of respect; our relationship was utterly frank and open. At times he might play cards somewhere and lose; when he got up the next morning he'd put on his wide-sleeved waistcoat and come and see me in the stables.

" 'Well, my almost half-respected Ivan Severianych,' he'd say. 'How are things with you?' That was his little joke, calling me 'almost half-respected'; as you'll see, he respected me fully.

"I knew what it meant when he came out with this joke, so I'd reply, 'Not too bad: thank God, things are good for me, but I don't know about Your Highness. How are your circumstances?'

" 'Mine are pretty foul; in fact they couldn't be worse.'

" 'How can that be? I'll bet you blew the lot, just as you did a few days ago.'

" 'You've guessed right, my half-respected Ivan, I've blown the lot, the lot, sir.'

" 'And how much,' I would ask, 'did they relieve Your Highness of?'

"He'd answer straightaway and say how many thousands he'd lost, and I'd shake my head and say, 'Your Highness deserves a thorough thrashing, but who'd do it?'

"He'd laugh and say, 'That's the trouble: nobody.'

" 'Well,' I'd say, 'why don't you lie down on my bed and I'll put a clean bolster at the top and flog you myself?'

"Naturally, he'd start pestering me to give him money so he could have a return match. 'No, instead of flogging me, just give me some of our expenses money for a return game: I'll go and win it back and fleece the lot of them.'

" 'No, thanks, I'm not having that; gamble if you like, but don't try to win it back.'

" 'What do you mean, "no, thanks"?' he'd begin with a laugh, before getting angry. 'Come on now, don't get above yourself: stop treating me like a child, give me the money.' "

We asked Ivan Severianych if he did in fact give his prince the money for a return match.

"Never," he replied. "I'd either deceive him by saying I'd spent all the money on oats, or I'd just leave the premises as quickly as possible."

"But that must have made him angry with you, mustn't it?"

"He did get angry, sir; he might announce, 'It's all over; my half-respected Ivan, you no longer work for me.' I would answer, 'Well, and what do I care? Fine. Please let me have my papers.' He'd say, 'Good. Kindly pack your bags: you'll get your papers tomorrow.'

"But the next day the subject wasn't even mentioned. It might only take him an hour to visit me in a completely different mood and say, 'Thank you, my extremely insignificant Ivan, for being so firm and not giving me money for a return game.'

"That was what he always felt afterward, so that if I happened to have one of my benders, he was as

kind and understanding as a brother."

"What came over you?"

"I explained to you that I used to have benders."

"What are *benders*?"

"I went off on a bender. I'd learned to drink spirits, and I avoided drinking every day. I never drank in moderation, but if I was ever really upset by anything, then I had a terrible urge to drink and I'd go on a bender straightaway and go missing for several days. You might not notice why it came over me: for example, we might let some horses go, and it's not as if they were your brothers, but I'd miss them badly and start drinking. Particularly if I had to part with a horse that was especially handsome, my eyes never stopped seeing the damned animal, so that I had to get away from the spell it had cast on me, and I'd go on a bender."

"So it means you took to drink?"

"Yes, sir, I'd go off and drink."

"For a long time?"

"Mmm . . . it varied, sir, depending on the bender. Sometimes I'd drink until I'd spent all my money, or somebody gave me a beating, or I'd beat up somebody. At other times I might manage to keep it short, I'd be held in a police station or sleep it off in a ditch, then I'd be satisfied and the urge would go. Those were times when I had a rule that I followed: when I felt that I needed to go on a bender I'd go to the prince and tell him, 'It's like this, Your Highness, please take care of my money, or I'm in deep trouble.'

"He didn't argue, he'd take the money or just ask, perhaps, 'Do you plan to get wasted for long, Your Grace?'

"Well, my answer would depend on how strong my urge was, whether it was a big bender or a short one. So I'd go, and he'd take charge of affairs and wait for my bender to end. But I was terribly fed up with my weakness, so I suddenly decided to free myself of it. That was when I went on my last bender, which is terrifying even to remember."

11

We couldn't help making a concerted effort to persuade Ivan Severianych to stretch his amiability to the limit by telling us everything about this disastrous episode in his life. He was too kind, of course, to refuse, and told us the following about his "last bender."

"We'd bought a mare named Dido from a stud: she was a young, golden-bay mare, meant for an officer to ride. She was wonderfully beautiful: friendly eyes; subtle, open nostrils; she breathed freely; a light mane; a chest that sat as neatly as a ship between her shoulders; white stockings over her legs, which she kicked about as if playing . . . In a word, any horse lover with an eye for beauty would be transfixed if he looked at an animal like her. As for me, I was so taken by her that I never even left the stable where she was; I kept joyfully caressing her. I would groom her myself and rub her down from head to hoof with a white cloth, so there wouldn't be a speck of dust anywhere on her, I'd even kiss her little forehead, right on the curl where the gold hair grew . . . There were two fairs near us in full swing at the time, one in L. and the other in K.: so the prince and I shared them out and each took one. Suddenly I had a letter from him, asking me to send various horses, including Dido. I had no idea why he needed to have the beauty that gave my horse-lover's eye so much joy. But I thought, of course, that he had exchanged or sold that lovely animal to somebody, or, even more likely, had lost her at cards . . . So I let the stable boys take Dido: I became horribly depressed and felt the desire for a bender. My situation at the time was quite extraordinary: I've already told you about my permanent arrangement: if the urge for a bender came over me, I'd go and see the prince and give him all my money—I always had a lot in cash—and tell him, 'I'll go missing for (however many) days.' But how would I deal with things now that my prince was elsewhere? So I thought, 'No, all the same, I shan't drink, because my prince isn't around and it's impossible to limit my bender, since there's nobody to hand my money to, and I've got a substantial sum, getting on for five thousand.' I decided that I couldn't do it and stuck firmly to my resolution that I wouldn't let myself go on a bender and utterly ruin myself. But I still didn't feel my urge weakening; on the contrary, I was more and more desperate for a bender. In the end I was obsessed, wondering how to arrange things so that I could satisfy my urge and still keep the prince's money intact. Therefore I started hiding the money in the most unlikely places, where nobody would even think of putting it . . . I thought, 'What can I do? Obviously I can't control myself, so I'll make sure my money's safe, then I'll deal with my urge and go on a bender.' But I was at a loss. Where could I hide the damned money? Wherever I put it, the moment I left it there it occurred to me that someone might steal it. So I'd go and hurriedly hide it

elsewhere . . . All this hiding exhausted me: haylofts, cellars, soffit boards, and other unlikely hiding places. But no sooner had I left than I suspected I'd been seen hiding the money and it would be found, so I'd go back, fetch it, and keep it on me, thinking now, 'No more of that: clearly I'm not meant this time to satisfy my urge.' Suddenly a divine idea struck me: after all, it was the devil who inflicted this passion on me, so I'd go and drive the swine out with something sacred. So I went to morning mass, prayed, took a piece of unconsecrated Communion bread. When I was leaving the church, I saw a picture on the wall of the Last Judgment with angels in a corner of hell beating the devil with chains. I stopped to look and prayed as hard as I could to the holy angels, then spat on my fist and stuck it into the devil's ugly mug.

" 'Well,' I said, 'two fingers to you: what goes around, comes around.' After that, I suddenly felt utterly calm; I took what I needed from home and went to an inn for tea . . . I could see among the customers in the inn a rogue—a real time-waster of a man. I'd seen him before and I considered him a mere con man or clown, because all he did was hang around the fairs and ask the gentry in French for handouts. He was supposed to be gentry and a former serving officer, but he'd squandered the lot and lost at cards and was going begging . . . When I entered the inn, the waiters were trying to throw him out, but he wouldn't go; he just stood there, saying, 'Don't you know who I am? I'm one of your superiors, I used to have my own serfs and there are lots of young men like you that I've thrashed in the stables just because I wanted to; if I've lost everything, that's the will of God and I bear the mark of His wrath, which means nobody may dare to touch me.'

"The waiters didn't believe a word, but he went on telling them how he lived, riding in carriages, how he chased all the civilians out of the public gardens, how he once stripped naked and went to see the governor's wife. 'But now,' he said, 'I've been cursed for my willfulness and my soul has turned as dry as stone so that I have constantly to wet it, so give me vodka! I don't have the money to pay for it, but I'll eat the glass as I drink it.'

"A customer who wanted to see him eat the glass ordered him a vodka. He immediately downed the vodka in one go, and started, as he promised, crunching the glass with his teeth and ate it in front of everybody. They were all delighted by the spectacle and roared with laughter. But I felt sorry for him: a gentleman by birth sacrificing his very innards because of his urge to drink vodka. I thought I had at least to let him rinse his gut of crunched glass, so I ordered him another glass of vodka but didn't make him eat the glass. I told him not to eat it. He appreciated my kindness and offered me his hand.

" 'I can see,' he said, 'that your parents were a gentleman's house serfs.'

" 'Yes,' I said, 'they were.'

" 'It's obvious you're not like these other pigs. *Grand merci* for that.'

" 'It's nothing,' I said, 'feel free.'

" 'No,' he said, 'I'm very glad to chat with you. Come closer: I'll sit next to you.'

" 'Please do, then.'

"He sat down next to me and began telling me how distinguished his family was, how serious his education. Then he said, 'What's that . . . are you drinking tea?'

" 'Yes. If you want, have some tea with me.'

" 'Thanks, but I can't drink tea.'

" 'Why not?'

"Because I'm a desperado, not an aficionado: order me a glass of vodka instead.' So he got a total of three vodkas out of me and I was getting very annoyed with this. He put me off even more because he said very little that was true: he mostly boasted and invented God knows what about himself, then he'd suddenly become all pathetic, weep, and talk about the pointlessness of it all.

" 'Just consider,' he said, 'the man I am. God Himself created me in the same year as the emperor: we're the same age.'

" 'So what?'

" 'What? What's my position, despite all that? In spite of everything, I haven't been at all special; I've ended up a nonentity and, as you've just seen, despised by everybody.' Having said this, he demanded more vodka, but this time a whole carafe, and spun me an endless story about the merchants who made fun of him in the inns. In the end he said, 'They're uneducated people. Do they think it's easy to endure having to drink all the time and wash your food down with vodka? It's a very hard vocation, brother, many people even find it impossible. But I've trained my nature, because I can see that I have to fulfill my destiny, so I endure.'

" 'But why,' I argued, 'indulge your habit so much? Just drop it.'

" 'Drop it? Oh no, brother, I can't possibly drop it.'

" 'Why not?' I asked.

“ ‘There are two reasons why not. First of all, because I can’t get to bed if I don’t drink enough vodka; I’d just stay on my feet; second, and most important, my Christian feelings won’t permit me.’

“ ‘What on earth are you talking about? I can understand that you can’t get to bed because you’re still looking for a drink. But I refuse to believe that it’s Christian feelings that won’t let you drop such a vile bad habit.’

“ ‘Yes, you don’t believe me, either . . . That’s what everyone says . . . But suppose I drop this habit of getting drunk, as you suggest, and then somebody else takes it up. Would that somebody be glad of it, or not?’

“I forked out for another carafe and sat and listened, because this was beginning to intrigue me. He went on: ‘That’s how it has to be. The agony has to end with me, rather than be passed on to someone else, because I’m from a good family and had a proper education—even when I was very little, I said my prayers in French, but I was heartless and tormented people: I used to lose my serfs at cards; I used to separate mothers from their children; I married a rich wife and drove her to her death. All in all, although it was my own fault, I grumbled at God for giving me such a character. So He punished me by giving me a different character, one without a drop of pride in myself—I don’t mind being spat on, as long as I’m drunk and can forget about myself.’

“ ‘Well then,’ I asked, ‘have you stopped grumbling at your character?’

“ ‘I don’t grumble, because even if it’s worse, it’s also better.’

“ ‘How can that be? There’s something I don’t understand: “worse, but better.” ’

“ ‘The fact is,’ he replied, ‘that now I know just one thing: I’m destroying myself, but I can’t destroy other people, because everyone turns away from me. I am now like Job on the dunghill, and that is my happiness and salvation.’ He then finished off the vodka and asked for another carafe before saying, ‘You know, my dear fellow, you should never despise anyone, because nobody can know the torments people undergo and suffer. We maniacs suffer, but that makes life easier for others. So if you yourself are afflicted by a passion, don’t go and drop it, in case someone else takes it up and suffers torment; instead, look for somebody who will consent to take this weakness from you.’

“ ‘Where on earth could somebody like that be found? Nobody would agree to do it.’

“ ‘Why not?’ he answered. ‘You don’t even have to go far to find somebody: he’s facing you. I am the man.’

“I asked, ‘Are you joking?’

“But he suddenly leaped up and said, ‘No, I’m not joking: if you don’t believe me, try me out.’

“ ‘How,’ I asked, ‘can I try you out?’

“ ‘Very simple. You’d like to know what my gift is? I have a great gift, brother. You can see I’m drunk, now . . . Am I, or aren’t I?’

“I looked at him and could see he was completely sozzled, swaying on his feet, his face bluish. I said, ‘Yes, of course you’re drunk.’

“He replied, ‘Right, now turn around for a minute to face the icon and recite to yourself Our Father.’

“I turned around and just silently recited Our Father while looking at the icon; then the drunk little lord gave me another order: ‘Now then, look at me. Am I drunk now, or not?’

“I turned right around and saw that he was completely sober, standing there smiling. I asked, ‘What does this mean, what’s the secret?’

“He answered, ‘It’s no secret; it’s called magnetism.’

“ ‘I don’t understand. What’s that?’

“ ‘There’s a special willpower in a man that neither drink nor sleep can weaken, because it’s a gift. I’ve demonstrated it to you so that you understand that, if I want, I can stop and never drink again, but I don’t want to do that, in case someone else takes to drink instead of me, and I might forget about God if I recover. But I am prepared and able instantly to take the passion for drink away from anyone else.’

“ ‘Take it away from me,’ I said, ‘I beg you.’

“ ‘You aren’t a drunk, are you?’

“ ‘I am,’ I said, ‘and at times a very hard drinker, too.’

“ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘don’t be shy. It’s just something I can do, and to show you how grateful I am for your generosity, I’ll take it all away from you.’

“ ‘Oh, please, I beg you, take it away!’

“ ‘With pleasure, my dear fellow: I’ll do it because you’ve been so generous. I’ll remove it and take it upon myself.’ He shouted out for more vodka and two glasses.

“ ‘What do you need two glasses for?’

“ ‘One for me, the other for you.’

“ ‘I’m not drinking,’ I said.

“He suddenly seemed to lose his temper. ‘Shush, *silenzio*, shut up! What are you now? My patient!’

“ ‘All right, have it your way: I’m your patient.’

“ ‘And I’m the doctor and you’re bound to do as I tell you and take your medicine.’ He then poured us a glass each and began waving his hands in the air above my glass, somewhat like a cathedral choir-master. He waved a couple of times and then ordered, ‘Drink!’

“I had my doubts, but I myself, I must admit, badly wanted a sip of vodka and he was telling me to drink. I thought, ‘All right, I’ll have a drink, if only out of curiosity,’ and I did.

“ ‘Is it good?’ he asked. ‘Does it taste nice or nasty?’

“ ‘I don’t know how to put it.’

“ ‘That means,’ he said, ‘you haven’t had enough.’ He poured a second glass and once more wiggled his hands over it. After a couple of wiggles, he shook his hand and made me drink this second glass, before asking, ‘What’s this one like?’

“I said, joking, ‘It seemed a bit heavy on the tongue.’

“He nodded and filled me a third glass and again ordered, ‘Drink it!’ I did so and said, ‘That wasn’t so heavy,’ then I tapped the carafe, treated him to a vodka and poured one for myself, and got down to drinking. He didn’t try to stop me, but he wouldn’t let me drink a single glass until he had waved his hand over it: the moment I picked it up he would take it from me and say, ‘Shush. *Silenzio*. *Attendez*,’ then wave his hands over it and say, ‘Now it’s ready. You can take it as prescribed.’

“That was my treatment in the inn at the hands of this little lord: it went on until evening, and I stayed calm, because I knew that I wasn’t drinking just for fun but in order to stop. I felt my belt to check on my money, and could feel it was all intact and in place; I went on drinking. While he was drinking with me, the gentleman told me about everything, all his wild sprees and parties, especially about love, and that ended with us quarreling, with me saying I didn’t understand love.

“I said, ‘What can I do about it, if I’m not attracted by all that nonsense? You should stop and think: you understand it all, and yet here you are, a tramp on the make.’

“He replied, ‘Shush. *Silenzio*! Love is our holy of holies!’

“ ‘A load of nonsense,’ I said.

“ ‘Peasant,’ he said. ‘You’re a scoundrel, too, if you dare to mock a feeling that is sacred to the heart by calling it a load of nonsense.’

“ ‘But it is just a load of nonsense.’

“ ‘Do you not understand,’ he asked, ‘what “beauty, nature’s perfection” is?’

“ ‘I do understand beauty in a horse.’

“He leaped up and tried to box my ears. ‘Can a horse be “beauty, nature’s perfection”?’

“It was now getting late, and he didn’t have time to prove any of that; the barman saw that we were both drunk, winked at the bouncers, six of whom rushed up to us and asked us to ‘kindly’ leave. They grabbed us both by the arms and put us out, and then locked the door for the night.

“That was when a spell came over me: although many, many years have passed since then, even now I can’t understand what effects had begun and what force was acting on me, only it seems to me that not one of the lives of the saints in the church’s martyrology talks of such temptations and experiences as I had.”

12

“My first action, after flying out of the inn, was to put my hand inside my shirt and check that my wallet was still there. It was. ‘Now,’ I thought, ‘all I have to worry about is getting home safe with the money.’ The night was as dark as you can imagine. You know, around Kursk summer nights can be dark, but very warm and soft; the stars are like lanterns hanging in the sky, but on the ground the darkness is so impenetrable that you imagine someone is groping and touching you . . . At the fairs there are masses of bad people of all sorts, and very often people are robbed or killed. Even though I felt I had my strength, I still knew that, first, I was drunk and, second, that if ten or more men attacked me, then even a lot of strength would be useless against them: I’d be robbed. I was certainly tipsy, but I remembered that every time I went to pay for drinks, got up, and sat down, my drinking companion, the little lord, could see that I had a great pile of cash on me. That was why it suddenly occurred to me that I might fall victim to some underhanded tricks on his part. Where was he now, actually? We’d been thrown out together; how had he managed to hide so quickly?

“I stood there, furtively looking around; I didn’t know his name, so I quietly called out, ‘Can you hear me, magnetizer? Where are you?’

“He suddenly loomed up in front of my eyes, like a devil, and said, ‘It’s me.’

“The voice seemed different to me, and it was so dark I couldn’t even make out his ugly mug. ‘Come a bit closer,’ I said. When he was close, I grabbed his shoulders and started examining him: I couldn’t work out who he was. The moment I touched him my memory was entirely wiped out. All I could hear was him babbling in French, ‘*Di-ka-ti-li-ka-ti-pé*,’ and I didn’t understand a word.

“ ‘What are you babbling?’ I asked.

“ ‘*Di-ka-ti-li-ka-ti-pé.*’

“ ‘Just stop it, idiot: tell me in Russian who you are, because I’ve forgotten.’

“ ‘*Di-ka-ti-li-ka-ti-pé*: I’m the magnetizer,’ he replied.

“ ‘Ugh, you rogue!’ I thought for a minute that I could recognize him, but when I took a good look, I saw he had two noses. Two noses, nothing else. While I was puzzling that out, I forgot again who he was . . . ‘Oh, to hell with you,’ I thought. ‘How did a crook like you hook onto me?’ I asked him again, ‘Who are you?’

“ ‘The magnetizer,’ he repeated.

“ ‘Get away from me. Perhaps you’re the devil, are you?’

“ ‘Not really, but something like it.’

“I hit him on the forehead; he took offense. ‘Why hit me? I’m doing you a favor and relieving you of your urge to drink, yet you’re hitting me.’

“Try as I might, again I forgot who he was, and said, ‘But who are you?’

“ ‘I’m your eternal friend,’ he said.

“ ‘Fine, then, if you’re my friend, are you still able to harm me?’

“ ‘No,’ he said, ‘I’m going to show you a *petit-comme-peu* which will make you feel like a different person.’

“ ‘Just stop talking rubbish, please.’

“ ‘I’m serious,’ he said, ‘utterly serious: a *petit-comme-peu*!’

“ ‘Stop this French chatter: I don’t understand what a *petit-comme-peu* is.’

“ ‘I’m going,’ he said, ‘to give your life a new understanding.’

“ ‘That’s all very well, but what sort of new understanding can you give me?’

“ ‘It means that you will understand “beauty, nature’s perfection.” ’

“ ‘What’s going to make me suddenly understand it?’

“ ‘Just come with me, and you’ll see right away.’

“ ‘All right, let’s go.’

“So we went. Both of us were staggering, but we kept going. I don’t know where to, but I did suddenly remember that I didn’t know who I was with, and I said again, ‘Stop. Tell me who you are, or else I won’t go.’

“When he told me I thought I remembered for a moment. I asked, ‘Why is it I keep forgetting who you are?’

“He replied, ‘It’s the effect of my magnetism. But you mustn’t be frightened by what is going to happen, just let me give you a bit more magnetism now.’ And he turned me so I had my back to him and he began feeling the back of my neck and my hair with his fingers . . . It was weird: he was poking away there as if he wanted to get right inside my head.

“I said, ‘Listen . . . who are you? Why are you digging about there?’

“ ‘Wait,’ he replied. ‘Keep still, I’m transferring my power, the magnetism, into you.’

“ ‘It’s fine if you’re transferring your power, but do you mean to rob me, by any chance?’

“He denied it. I said, ‘Hang on, let me check my money.’ I did: it was all there. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘now I’m sure you’re not a thief.’ But I forgot again who he was. I couldn’t recall even how to ask him about that; I was too preoccupied with the feeling that he had somehow got right inside me through the back of my neck and was looking at things through my eyes, so that my eyes were just pieces of glass for him.

“ ‘He really has done something to me,’ I thought, and asked, ‘Where’s my eyesight gone?’

“ ‘You don’t have your own eyesight anymore.’

“ ‘What is this nonsense about no eyesight?’

“ ‘Whatever you see with your own eyes now doesn’t exist.’

“ ‘That’s a fine kettle of fish! All right, let me try really hard.’

“I goggled as hard as I could: I seemed to see various vile faces on legs looking at me from every dark nook, running across my path, standing at a crossroads, waiting, and saying, ‘Let’s kill him and take his fortune.’ In fact, I was facing my disheveled little lord, and his ugly mug was all lit up, while behind me I could hear a terrible amount of noise, a wild orgy of voices and jangling and cheers and shrieks and loud merry laughter. When I looked around I realized that I was upright, my back leaning against a building:

the windows were open and there was a light in the middle, from where the sound of various voices, of an uproar and a whining guitar came. My little lord was in front of me again, waving his open palms over my face, then his hands over my chest, dwelling over my heart, then pressing and seizing me by my fingers, shaking me gently, before waving his arms more, making such an effort that I could see he was covered in sweat.

"But as soon as the light shone on me through the windows of the building, I felt myself becoming conscious again: I stopped being afraid of him and I said, 'Now listen, whoever you are—devil or Satan, or a petty demon—just be so kind as to either wake me up, or disappear.'

"His response was to say, 'Wait, it's not time yet: it's still too dangerous, you're not yet strong enough to take it.'

" 'What won't I be strong enough to take?'

" 'What's happening in the ethereal spheres at the moment.'

" 'Why can't I hear anything unusual?'

"He insisted that I wasn't listening properly, and he spoke to me as if reciting Scripture: 'If you are to hear, then imitate the example of the psaltery player, who lowers his head and, applying his hearing to the singing, plucks the plectrum with his hand.'

" 'No,' I thought. 'What is all this? It's not even like a drunk speaking, the way he's talking to me.'

"Meanwhile he was looking at me and gently stroking me with his hands, and went on with his attempts to persuade me. 'In this way, in harmony with the strings, artistically coordinating one with the other, the psaltery produces a song and the psaltery player rejoices at the honeyed sweetness.'

"To put it simply, I didn't seem to hear the words: it was like life-giving water streaming over my ears, while I thought, 'Would you believe it? It's amazing how this drunk can talk like Scripture!' By now my little lord had stopped his fidgeting and was saying, 'Well, that's all you're getting: wake up now and summon your strength!'

"He bent down as he said this, raking about in his trouser pocket for something and finally, after a long time, pulling something out. When I looked, I saw it was a tiny little lump of sugar, covered in dirt: I could see it had been in his pocket for ages. He scraped the dirt off with his fingernails, blew on it, and said, 'Open your mouth.'

"I asked, 'Why?' but opened my mouth wide. And he pushed the lump of sugar past my lips, saying, 'Suck it as hard as you can: it's magnetic mentor sugar. It'll give you strength.'

"I got his meaning, even if he was speaking French, but I didn't ask him about magnetism any more. I just concentrated on sucking the sugar, but I could no longer see the man who'd given it to me. The devil alone knows if he had meanwhile slipped away somewhere in the darkness, or where he had vanished to: in any case, I was alone and in full possession of my senses. I thought, 'Why wait for him? I should go home now.' But I had another problem: I didn't know what street I was in and what building I was standing by. I wondered if it was actually a building, or perhaps I just imagined it, and it was all a spell I was under . . . It was night now, everybody was asleep, so why was there a light on there? So I thought I'd better investigate: I'd drop in and see what was going on. If there were real people there, then I'd ask them the way home, and if they were an optical illusion and not real people . . . then where was the danger? I'd say, 'This is consecrated ground: devil, be gone!' and everything would disappear."

13

"Bold and resolute, I walked onto the porch, crossed myself, and cursed the devil: it was all right—the building was standing still, not rocking, and I could see the doors were open and there was a big, long lobby with a candle-lit lamp at the far end. When I looked around I saw two more doors on the left, both zinc-lined, and the same candle holders with mirrorlike stars. I wondered, but couldn't work out, what sort of place this was: it didn't seem to be an inn, but it was obviously a place that welcomed guests. When I listened carefully, I could hear a song cascading on the other side of the zinc-lined door . . . it couldn't have been more languid or heartfelt; the voice of the singer rang out like the bells of Malines,[2] it plucked at your soul and completely captivated it. So I was listening without taking a step farther, when the far door suddenly opened wide and I saw a tall Gypsy emerge wearing silk trousers and a tight-waisted velvet jacket: he was quickly ushering someone ahead of him through a special door under the lamp at the far end, a door that I only now noticed. I admit I didn't get a good look at the man he was showing out, but I fancied it was my magnetizer whom he had escorted, for he was saying, as the latter left: 'All right, all right, my good man, don't take offense because you're only getting half a ruble: come back tomorrow and if we make money out of *him*, we'll give you extra for bringing him.'

“The door was then bolted shut, and the Gypsy ran up to me as if it was all unplanned, opened the door under the mirror for me, and said, ‘A businessman like you is very welcome, sir: please listen to our songs! We’ve got some good voices.’

“Saying this, he flung the door wide open . . . Gentlemen, I was swamped by something I can’t define, but I felt such an affinity to it that I was entirely in my element. The room was vast, but the ceiling low and bowed, like a belly hanging down; it was all dark and soot stained, the tobacco smoke was so thick that you’d hardly know there was a lit candelabra hanging from the ceiling. Underneath it there were people in this haze . . . an awful lot, an incredible number of people, and a young Gypsy girl, whose voice I had heard, was singing to them. Moreover, the moment I entered, she had just ended the last piece, unbelievably subtly and tenderly . . . Her voice died away, and for a moment everything else seemed to die . . . After a minute, however, everyone leaped up, like madmen, clapping their hands and shouting. I could only feel amazement: where had so many people come from, and yet more and more of them seemed to be emerging from the smoke. ‘Oh,’ I wondered, ‘maybe these aren’t decent people but rabble.’ Yet I could only see a number of remount officers and horse breeders whom I knew, as well as ordinary rich merchants and landowners, people who were horse lovers, and it was among this audience that this Gypsy girl moved . . . you can’t describe her even as a woman, she was more like a colorful snake, moving on her tail and bending her entire body, her black eyes just burning you with fire. An intriguing figure! She was holding a big tray with a lot of glasses of champagne around the edge, and in the middle a terrific pile of money. There was no silver there, only gold and banknotes: five-ruble ‘bluetits,’ ten-ruble ‘gray ducks,’ twenty-five-ruble ‘redheaded grouse’: everything except hundred-ruble ‘swans.’ She’d hand someone a glass of champagne, he’d drink it straightaway and throw down his money, according to his enthusiasm, gold or banknotes; then she’d kiss him on the lips and bow. She passed along the first row and the second—the guests were sitting in a rough semicircle—and then passed along the last row: I was standing on a chair behind that row, and she was about to turn back, not intending to offer me champagne, but the old Gypsy following her suddenly shouted at her, ‘Grusha!’ and pointed me out with his eyes. She flickered her eyelashes at him—I swear to God, those eyelashes were incredibly long, black, and seemed to have a life of their own, they moved like birds; but I noticed that her eyes, when the Gypsy ordered her about, suddenly breathed sheer fury. She must have been annoyed at being ordered to offer me champagne, but she did her duty: she went up to me, behind the third row, bowed, and said, ‘Dear guest, drink to my health!’

“She had an instant effect on me: I couldn’t even respond. She bent down over her tray as she faced me and I could see in her black hair, which curled down and fell behind her back, a parting like a streak of silver. I became a man possessed, I lost my mind. I drank the champagne she offered and looked at her face through the glass: I couldn’t decide whether her skin was dark or fair, yet I could see that there was a reddish hue under her skin, like a plum in the sun, and a vein in her soft temple was pulsing. I thought, ‘This is real beauty, “beauty, nature’s perfection.” The magnetizer spoke the truth: it’s quite different from the beauty of a horse, a creature you buy and sell.’

“So I drank to the bottom and banged the glass on the tray; she stood there waiting to be paid for her affection. Accordingly, I thrust my hand in my pocket, but all I could grab were twenty-five- or twenty-kopeck coins and other small change. ‘Not enough,’ I thought. ‘It’s insulting to give petty cash, and it’s embarrassing if others see.’ I could hear the gentry saying, quite loudly, to the Gypsy, ‘Hey, Vasili Ivanov, why do you make Grusha serve that peasant? We find it offensive.’

“The Gypsy replied, ‘Gentlemen, we have respect and room for any guest, and my daughter knows her father’s Gypsy customs; you have no cause to be offended, you don’t know yet that a simple man can be capable of appreciating beauty and talent. There are plenty of examples to prove it.’

“When I heard this, I thought, ‘I hope the wolves get you all! Just because you’re richer than me, do you think you have more feelings, too? To hell with that! Whatever happens, I’ll be the prince’s servant afterward, but for now I won’t be shamed. I won’t demean this unbelievable beauty by being stingy.’

“And I then stuck my hand under my shirt, took a hundred-ruble ‘swan’ from my wad, and slapped it onto the tray. The Gypsy girl immediately moved the tray, so that she held it in one hand, and with her other hand took a white handkerchief and wiped my lips, and then, just brushing them, kissed me, before retreating: it was as if I’d been wiped with poison.

“She left; I did not move. But the old Gypsy, Grusha’s father, and another Gypsy grabbed me by the arms and dragged me to the front, seating me in the front row next to the chief of police and other gentlemen. I must admit I was reluctant to move: I didn’t want to stay, I was anxious to leave the building. But they begged me not to leave and wouldn’t let me go; they called out, ‘Grusha! Grusha, darling, stop our valued guest from leaving!’

“She emerged and . . . the devil knows how she looked at you: she filled her eyes with something to

infect you, and spoke: ‘Don’t offend us; stay a while here with us.’

“ ‘As if anyone could offend you,’ I said, and sat down.

“She kissed me again, and I had the same sensation: as if my mouth had been brushed with poison and it burned all my blood, right to my heart. After that, songs and dancing began again, and another Gypsy girl circulated with champagne. She was good-looking, too, but nothing compared with Grusha. She didn’t have half of Grusha’s beauty, so I merely took some quarter rubles from my pocket and strewed them on her tray . . . The gentry mocked me for this, but I didn’t care, because I was interested only in Grusha and her whereabouts and was waiting to hear her voice solo, without the chorus. But she wasn’t singing; she was sitting with the others, joining in but not singing a solo, and I couldn’t make out her voice. All I could see was her little mouth with her white teeth . . . ‘What an unlucky orphan I am,’ I thought. ‘I’ve dropped in for a minute and lost a hundred rubles, and she’s the one singer I shan’t hear!’ But, fortunately for me, others wanted to hear her too; after an interval, important visitors, other gentlemen, shouted out as one, ‘Grusha! Grusha! “The Boat!” Grusha! “The Boat!” ’

“The Gypsies cleared their throats, and her younger brother picked up a guitar, and she sang. You know . . . in any case, their singing gets to you, it’s touching, but when I heard this voice of hers, so alluring when I was outside the door, I was overcome with emotion. I was terribly taken by it. She began in a way that might seem a little coarse, masculine, like ‘The se-e-a is ho-o-owling, the se-e-a is gro-o-aning,’ and you could really hear the sea groaning and a little boat being swallowed up by it. Then there was a sharp change in her voice, as she turned to the star: ‘Beloved, golden star, herald of the day, earthly sorrows mean nothing to me when you’re there.’ And there was yet another sharp, unexpected turn. Gypsy songs always have these mood changes: weeping, languishing, leaving you heartbroken, then suddenly they strike up quite a different tone, putting their hearts back in it . . . So it was now: she was making the sea swell with her ‘Boat,’ then the whole chorus shrieks out:

‘Ja-lá-la, Ja-lá-la,
Ja-lá-la priigalá!
Ja-lá-la priigalá,
Gai da chepuringalia!
Gei gop-gai, ta gara!
Gei gop-gai-ta gara!’

Then Grusha does the rounds again with her wine and tray, and I give her another ‘swan’ from the wad under my shirt . . . Everyone began turning to look at me outdoing them with my donations, so that they even felt ashamed when they gave their money after me. But I wasn’t going to stop at anything, because I’d decided to show my feelings, to wear my heart on my sleeve, and I did. Every time Grusha sang something I gave her a swan: I lost count of how many I’d handed over, I just gave them and asked for nothing more; but the others all joined in asking her to sing, and she refused to sing their requests, saying ‘I’m tired.’ I was the only one to nod to the Gypsy, to hint that he might make her go on. He would just give her a look, and she would sing. She sang a great deal, sir, each song more powerful than the last, and I chucked a lot of swans, without counting, until at the end, I don’t know what the time was, but dawn was now breaking, she really did seem to run out of strength, she was exhausted and, as if giving me a hint, sang, ‘Depart, don’t look, get out of my sight.’ These words were, it seemed, her way of repelling me, but other words seemed to be a query, ‘Or do you want to toy with my lion’s heart and feel beauty’s full power over you?’ So I gave her yet another swan. Like it or not, she kissed me again: it was like a sting, and her eyes had a dark flame in them, while the other Gypsies roared out a farewell at that tricky hour:

‘Feel it, my darling girl,
My beloved, how I love you!’

And everyone joined in, looking at Grusha: I was watching her too, drawing out the words ‘Feel it!’ Then the Gypsies took up the Russian song, ‘Move, hut, move, stove: the master has nowhere to lie down,’ and everyone suddenly began dancing . . . The Gypsies, men and girls, were dancing too, so were the gentry: everyone was whirling around together, so that the hut really did seem to move. Gypsy girls were dashing about in front of the gentry, who tried to keep up with them, the younger ones whistling, the older ones croaking and groaning. I saw that all the seats were now deserted . . . Even the so-called dignitaries, men whom you’d never expect to clown about, were on their feet. One of the more pompous ones might stay seated and, you could see, was too embarrassed to join in, would just dart his eyes, or twitch his mustache, but then a devil jerks him by the shoulder and another devil swings his leg: lo and

behold, he leaps up and throws his legs about at random, since he doesn't know how to dance. The police chief was unbelievably fat; he was the father of two married daughters, but he and his sons-in-law were gasping and puffed up like catfish, tripping over one another; a hussar remount officer, a rich major and fine figure of a man, a devil-may-care dancer, was the star of the dance: he had his hands on his hips and, his feet turned out, was tapping his heels, ahead of everybody, strutting, rolling his body into a ball, and then, when he encountered Grusha, he'd shake his head violently, drop his hat at her feet and cry out, 'Tread on me, crush me, beauty of beauties!' As for her . . . she really was a dancer. I've seen actresses dancing in theaters, all that's just rubbish, no better than an officer's horse doing dressage on parade purely for amusement, without any imagination, jerking about in every direction, but there's no fire or life. That queen of the ball, however, once she started moving, was like Pharaoh's snake: she floated, her body not swaying, but you could hear the serpent cartilage cracking and marrow moving from bone to bone; when she stood still and bent forward, moving her shoulder and lining up her eyebrows with the toe of her foot . . . That was a picture! Just the sight of her dance was enough to drive everyone out of their minds: people rushed toward her crazily, not knowing what they were doing: some had tears in their eyes, some bared their teeth, but they all yelled, 'We don't care what it costs: dance!' and threw money at her feet, some gold, some banknotes. The crowd around her grew thicker and thicker; I was the only one seated, and even so I wasn't sure how long I could hold out, because I couldn't bear the sight of her stepping on the hussar's hat . . . She did, and it plucked my heartstrings; she did it again and it plucked at me again; finally, I thought, 'Why am I tormenting myself for nothing? I'll let my own soul go wild.' I leaped up, shoved the hussar aside, and squatted on my haunches, Cossack-style, in front of Grusha . . . I thought of a way to stop her treading on the hussar's hat: they were all yelling that they didn't care what it cost, but I wasn't impressed: I would prove by deed, not word, that I didn't care. So I leaped into the air, threw a swan from the wad under my shirt at her feet, and shouted, 'Crush it! Tread on it!' She hesitated, even though my swan was more valuable than the hussar's hat, and she preferred pursuing the hussar. But the old Gypsy, thank God, noticed, and stamped his foot at her. She got the message and joined in with me. She sailed up to me, lowered her eyes, like the wormwood snake that burned the earth with its wrath, and I leaped about like a demon before her, and at every leap I flung a swan at her feet . . . I held her in such awe that I was wondering whether this accursed creature had created heaven and earth. I yelled roughly at her, 'Move faster!' and kept dropping swans at her feet, then I put my hand under my shirt to get another one and, behold, there were only ten left . . . 'Ugh,' I thought, 'the devil can have the lot of you!,' so I crumpled them up together and threw the lot at her feet, then grabbed a bottle of champagne off the table, broke off the neck, and shouted, 'Move aside, my soul, or I'll spill it on you,' and then I drank her health with the bottle of champagne, because I had a terrible thirst after that dancing."

14

"Well, and what happened next?" we asked Ivan Severianych.

"Afterward everything happened the way *he* promised it would."

"Who promised?"

"The magnetizer who put the spell on me. He promised to release me from demon drink, and he did: since then I haven't touched a drop. He cast a very strong spell."

"Well, sir, how did you settle with your prince about all the hundred-ruble swans you squandered?"

"Somehow it was very simple, I don't know why. When I got home, out of the clutches of those Gypsies, I don't remember getting to bed, but I remember the prince knocking and calling; I tried to get off the bench I slept on but couldn't find the edge and couldn't get down. If I crawled to one end, there was no edge, and if I turned to the other, I couldn't find the edge there, either . . . I got lost on my bench, would you believe it! The prince was shouting, 'Ivan Severianych!' and I was calling back, 'Coming!' but clambering all over the place without finding the edge. In the end I thought that if I couldn't get down, I'd have to jump, so I took a running jump and landed as far away as I could; I felt something hit my face and heard something clanging and scattering around me, and then behind me too, and the prince's voice calling to his batman, 'Bring a light, quickly!'

"I stood there, not moving, because I didn't know if I was dreaming or awake: I could see everything above me and supposed I was still on the bench, that I hadn't reached the edge; but when the batman brought a light, I saw instead that I was standing on the floor, that I'd jumped face-first into a cupboard containing all the crystal glass in the household and had smashed the lot."

"How did you get so confused?"

“Very easily: I thought I was sleeping on the bench, as I always did, but I must have lain on the floor when I got back from the Gypsies, so I kept crawling, looking for the edge, and then started jumping . . . and jumped right into the cupboard. I was confused because this . . . magnetizer had released me from demon drink, but jinxed me with the demon of lewdness. That made me recall his words, ‘I hope it won’t be worse if you stop drinking.’ So I went looking for him: I wanted to ask him to demagnetize me back to my old state. But I couldn’t find him. He too had drunk far too much: he couldn’t take it; he went to the woman who ran the bar opposite the Gypsies and got so drunk that he died.”

“So you stayed magnetized, did you?”

“I did, sir.”

“Was this magnetizing effective for a long time?”

“Why just a long time? It may still be working even now.”

“But all the same, we’re curious how you got on with the prince. Didn’t you even have it out about the hundred-ruble swans?”

“No, sir. We did discuss it, but not seriously. The prince had also lost all his money when he came home; he asked me for some money for a revenge game. I told him, ‘Forget about it: I haven’t got any money.’

“He thought I was joking. I went on, ‘No, while you were away I had a big bender.’

“He asked me, ‘How on earth could you get through five thousand on one bender?’

“I told him I’d spent the lot in one go on a Gypsy girl . . . He didn’t believe me. So I said, ‘Don’t believe me, then, but I’m telling you the truth.’

“He was about to turn nasty, saying, ‘Lock the door, then, I’ll teach you to squander government money.’ Then he suddenly abandoned the idea and said, ‘No need for any of that. I’m just like you, wayward.’

“He went to his room to sleep for the rest of the night; I went to the haystack to sleep. When I woke up, I was in the hospital and I heard people saying I’d had an attack of the shaking frenzy, and apparently I’d tried to hang myself, but, thank God, they’d wrapped me in a straitjacket. When I recovered I went to see the prince in his village, because in the meantime he’d retired from the army. I told him, ‘Your Highness, I have to work for you and pay back the money.’

“He told me to go to hell. I could see he felt very ill-done by me. I went up to him and bent over him. ‘What’s all this about?’ he asked.

“ ‘At least give me a thorough lashing, then.’

“He replied, ‘What makes you think I’m angry with you; for all you know, I don’t consider you in the least guilty!’

“ ‘That can’t be,’ I said. ‘How could I not be guilty when I squandered a fortune like that? I know I’m a scoundrel for doing that: hanging’s too good for me.’

“He answered, ‘What can we do, brother? You’re an artist.’

“ ‘How do you mean,’ I asked.

“ ‘That’s how it is, my dear Ivan Severianych, you, my half-respected, are an artist.’

“ ‘That makes no sense to me.’

“ ‘Don’t take it badly,’ the prince said, ‘because I’m an artist too.’

“ ‘Now I understand,’ I thought. ‘Clearly, I’m not the only one who’s drunk himself into a shaking frenzy.’

“He got up, tapped his pipe on the floor, and said, ‘There’s nothing amazing about your chucking everything you had at her, because, brother, I gave her more than I have or ever have had.’

“My eyes nearly popped out of my head. ‘Your Highness, sir, please don’t tell me that, it’s too much, just listening to you is frightening.’

“ ‘No need for you to be so scared; God is merciful, maybe I’ll find a way around this. It’s just that I paid the Gypsy camp fifty thousand rubles for your Grusha.’

“I gasped. ‘What, fifty thousand rubles! For a Gypsy girl? Is the little snake worth that much?’

“ ‘Well now,’ he replied, ‘half-respected, you’re talking drivel, you’re not being an artist . . . What do you mean, not worth that much? A woman is worth a universe, because she can inflict a wound that not even a kingdom will heal, and yet in one minute she herself can heal it for you.’

“I couldn’t help thinking that this was true, but I still shook my head, saying, ‘But what a price: fifty thousand!’

“ ‘Yes, yes,’ he said, ‘and don’t go on about it, because I’m grateful they accepted that much, otherwise I’d have paid more . . . I’d have paid anything you like.’

“ ‘You should have just washed your hands of the whole business.’

“ ‘I couldn’t do that, brother, I couldn’t wash my hands of it.’

“ ‘Why not?’

“ ‘She’s wounded me with her beauty and her talent; I need to be healed, or else I’ll go mad. Now tell me, she’s beautiful, isn’t she? Eh? Isn’t she? It’s enough to drive you mad, isn’t it?’

“I bit my lip; I was silent, but my head was just trembling. Then I said, ‘True, true.’

“ ‘You know,’ said the prince, ‘that I don’t mind even dying for a woman. Can you understand not minding dying?’

“ ‘What’s to understand,’ I said. ‘Beauty, nature’s perfection.’

“ ‘What do you mean by that?’

“ ‘What I mean is that beauty is nature’s perfection, and enough to make perishing for it . . . a joy to anyone captivated by it.’

“ ‘Good man!’ my prince responded. ‘Good man, my almost half-respected and very highly insignificant Ivan Severianych. It’s the perishing itself that gives joy, and what I really relish now is that I have completely wrecked my life for her: I’ve retired early, I’ve mortgaged my estate, and from now on I’ll be living here, not seeing anyone, I’ll just be on my own looking her in the face.’

“ ‘How are you going to look her in the face? She isn’t here, is she?’

“ ‘How else?’ he answered. ‘Of course she’s here.’

“ ‘That can’t possibly be, can it?’

“ ‘Just stay where you are,’ he said. ‘I’ll bring her in now. You’re an artist, and I’m not going to hide her from you.’

“Then he left me alone in the room. I stood there, waiting and thinking, ‘Oh, that’s not good if you’re determined to look at nothing but her face! You’ll bore her.’ But I didn’t think further along those lines, because once I recalled that she was in the house, my whole body felt hot and my mind was blurred, wondering, ‘Am I really going to see her in a moment?’ It was then that they came in: the prince first, one hand holding a guitar with a broad scarlet strap, the other hand dragging in Grusha, gripping both her little hands; she was downcast, digging her heels in; she wouldn’t look at anything, only those long black eyelashes of hers flapped over her cheeks like a bird’s wings.

“The prince brought her in, used his hands to make her sit like a child on a soft sofa, with her feet in the corner; he shoved one velvet cushion behind her back and another under her right elbow, then hung the guitar strap over her shoulder and placed her fingers on the strings. He then sat on the floor next to the sofa and laid his head on her scarlet morocco-leather slipper; he nodded to indicate that I should also sit.

“I quietly lowered myself to the floor by the threshold, also tucking my legs under my haunches; I sat there looking at her. There was a silence almost like a vacuum. I just sat there until my knees were throbbing with pain, and when I looked at her, she hadn’t moved at all; I looked at the prince and saw that he had chewed his mustache up with longing, but he didn’t say a word to her.

“I nodded to him to ask why he wasn’t ordering her to sing. He made various grimaces at me to indicate that she wouldn’t obey him.

“So we both went on sitting on the floor, waiting; suddenly she seemed to become delirious, sighing and sobbing, with tears streaming over her eyelashes, while her fingers crept over the strings like wasps and twanged them . . . Suddenly, as if weeping, she sang very quietly, ‘Kind people, hear the sorrow of my heart.’

“The prince whispered, ‘What?’

“I replied in a whisper in French, ‘*Petit-comme-peu.*’ There was no more to be said. It was then that she suddenly shrieked, ‘And I shall be sold, sold for my beauty,’ then flung the guitar as far as she could from her knees, ripped off her head scarf, and fell facedown onto the sofa, covering her face with her hands and weeping; the sight of her made me weep, and the prince, too . . . But the prince picked up the guitar and, more like a priest chanting than a singer, groaned, ‘If you knew all the fire of love, all the longing of my fiery soul,’ and then collapsed into sobbing. He sang and sobbed, ‘Give calm to my troubled soul, give happiness to an unhappy man.’ He was in such a violent emotional state that, as I watched, she took notice of his tears and his singing: she began to quiet down, to restrain herself, and suddenly she gently lifted her little hand from her face and, like a mother, tenderly embraced his head.

“Well, this made me see that she now felt pity for him and was going to reassure him and heal all the longings of his fiery soul, so, without anyone noticing, I quietly got up and left the room.”

“I expect that this was when you joined the monastery, was it?” somebody asked.

“No, sir, not then, but later,” replied Ivan Severianych, adding that for a while he was destined to see a lot of worldly things involving that woman, until everything that she was fated to undergo had been fulfilled and he himself was no longer needed.

Naturally, Ivan Severianych’s audience besieged him with requests to give an account, however brief,

of Grusha's life: he did so.

15

"You see," Ivan Severianych began, "my prince was a kindly soul, but he couldn't stick to anything. Whatever he wanted, he had to have at once and at any cost; otherwise he'd be out of his mind, and at that period there was nothing in the world he wouldn't sacrifice to get what he wanted. Afterward, once he had what he wanted, he didn't value his good fortune. That's what happened with the Gypsy girl, and Grusha's father and all the Gypsies in their clan understood that well from the very beginning. God knows how much they'd made him pay for her, more than his personal finances could allow, because his estate might have been a good one, but it was destitute. The prince didn't have the ready money for the price that the Gypsies had set for Grusha; he got into debt and had to leave the army.

"Knowing all his habits, I didn't expect any good to come from him, for me or for Grusha, and I turned out to be right. For a while he kept fondling her, never leaving her alone, looking at her with every breath; suddenly he started yawning and began asking me to keep him company all the time.

" 'Sit down,' he said, 'and listen.' I took a chair, to sit as close to the door as I could, and listened. This happened often: he would ask her to sing, but she'd say, 'Who am I supposed to sing for? You've turned cold: I want my song to make someone's soul burn and feel pain.'

"The prince would immediately send for me and we'd both listen to her; afterward Grusha started reminding him to call for me, and she began to treat me as a close friend, while I often took tea, after she had sung, in her quarters, along with the prince. That happened, of course, only at a special table or somewhere by the window, because if she were left on her own, then she would always have me simply sit by her side. This went on for some time; the prince began to get more and more withdrawn, and once he said to me, 'Do you know what, Ivan Severianych? What with one thing and another, my affairs are in a very bad way.'

"I replied, 'What's so bad about them? Thank God, you live well; you have all you need.'

"He suddenly took offense. 'What a fool you are, my half-respected Ivan. What do I actually have?'

" 'Everything you need.'

" 'Wrong,' he said. 'I'm poor now; I have to count the cost of a bottle of wine for dinner. Is that living? Is that living?'

" 'So that's what's bothering you,' I thought, and said, 'Well, if you're short of wine, too bad, you can put up with it, but you have something sweeter than wine and honey.'

"He realized I was referring to Grusha, and I seemed to have shamed him; he walked about, waving his arms, saying, 'Of course . . . of course . . . naturally . . . only . . . I've been living here for six months now and haven't seen a single visitor . . .'

" 'What do you need visitors for when you have your sweetheart?'

"The prince flared up. 'Brother, you don't understand a thing; nothing is good on its own.'

" 'Aha,' I thought, 'so that's your new tune, is it?' I said, 'What can we do about it?'

" 'Let's deal in horses again,' he said. 'I want remount officers and breeders to start coming again.'

"Trading in horses is a trivial pursuit, not fit for gentlemen. But, I thought, anything that keeps the child happy and stops him crying; so I said, 'Let's do it.'

"So the two of us set up horse paddocks. But no sooner had we started than the prince was carried away by his new passion: he had somehow to get hold of money, to buy horses right away, and he took anything, grabbing without looking, not listening to me . . . We bought an enormous number but couldn't sell any. He quickly lost patience with this business and abandoned the horses; then he proposed all sorts of random nonsense. He'd be in a rush to build some extraordinary water mill, or he'd start up a tannery, and everything ended in losses and debts. He couldn't stay at home; he was always rushing off somewhere, looking for something, while Grusha was on her own and in a state . . . pregnant. She was bored. 'I don't see much of him,' she'd say. She'd put a brave face on it; she tried being tactful: as soon as she noticed he was bored after a day or two at home, she'd suggest, 'My emerald, my sapphire, you should take a trip, get some fresh air: you shouldn't be sitting here with me, I'm too simple, uneducated.'

"When she said this, he would immediately feel ashamed; he would kiss her hands and make an effort for two or three days, but then he would be off with a flourish and put me in charge of her. 'Look after her,' he said, 'half-respected Ivan Severianych. You're an artist, not an idle wastrel like me; you're a real, high-class artist, which is why you can talk to her so you're both happy. As for me, all this "emerald-sapphire" stuff bores me to tears.'

" 'Why should it?' I ask. 'That's love talk.'

“ ‘It may be love talk, but it’s stupid and tiresome.’

“I gave no answer: after this I could go and see her at any time. When the prince was away, I went twice every day to her quarters to have tea and distract her the best I could. And she needed distracting, because once she got talking, she could only complain: ‘My dear, true friend Ivan Severianych, dear man, my jealousy is a real torment for me.’

“Naturally, I tried to calm her down. ‘Why torment yourself? No matter where he goes, he always comes back to you.’ But she would burst into tears, strike her breast with her hands, and ask, ‘No, please tell me, don’t hide it from me, my dear friend, where does he go?’

“ ‘To see the gentry, to the neighbors, or to town.’

“ ‘Isn’t there a woman somewhere who’s come between us? Tell me: perhaps there’s someone he loved before me and he’s gone back to her, or has my villain decided to get married?’ Her eyes were now blazing so hard that they were terrifying to look at.

“I was reassuring her, but thinking, ‘God knows what he’s doing,’ since we hadn’t seen much of him recently.

“But as the idea that he did intend to marry got a real grip on her, she began trying to plead with me: ‘Dear Ivan Severianych, go to town; go, find out everything you can about him and tell me without hiding anything.’ She became more and more insistent, and I began to feel so sorry for her that I thought, ‘I’ll go regardless. But if I find out something bad, about him being unfaithful, I won’t tell her the whole truth: I’ll take a look and make certain of everything.’

“I invented a pretext, saying I needed to fetch horse medicine from the herbalist. I went with a devious and cunning plan. What Grusha didn’t know, and what the servants were very strictly forbidden to tell her, was that the prince, before she came along, had another mistress in the town: she was Evgenia Semionovna, a gentlewoman, a provincial official’s daughter. The whole town knew her as a fine piano player, and a very kind lady, who was also very beautiful. She had a daughter by my prince, but she’d put on weight and, they said, that’s why he dropped her. But, as he still had a lot of money then, he bought this lady and their daughter a house, where they lived and which gave them an income. The prince never came to see this Evgenia Semionovna after he had endowed her, but our servants never forgot her kindness and, whenever they came to town, would go and see her, because they were fond of her and she was extremely welcoming to all our people, and interested in the prince.

“So when I came to the town, I went straight to see this kind lady and said, ‘Madam Evgenia Semionovna, I’m staying here with you.’

“She said, ‘Quite right, I’m very glad. But why don’t you go to the prince’s quarters and see him?’

“ ‘Surely he isn’t in town, is he?’

“ ‘He is,’ she said. ‘He’s been here more than a week, dealing with some business.’

“ ‘What new business is this?’

“ ‘A factory: he’s leasing a cloth factory.’

“ ‘My God, what has gotten into his head now?’

“ ‘That’s not a bad thing, is it?’

“ ‘It’s fine,’ I said, ‘but I’m surprised somehow.’

“She smiled. ‘There’s something else that should surprise you: the prince wrote to me, asking me to receive him, because he wants to see his daughter.’

“ ‘Well,’ I asked, ‘will you let him, ma’am?’

“She shrugged, then replied, ‘Of course; he can come and see his daughter.’ Then she sighed and sat there, her head lowered in thought. She was still a young woman, fair and good-looking, and her conversation was far better than Grusha’s, who could only come out with her ‘my emerald and sapphire.’ Evgenia was utterly different. I felt jealous.

“ ‘Oh,’ I thought, ‘suppose after looking at the child he sets his insatiable eyes on you, Evgenia Semionovna. That won’t augur well for my Grusha.’ That’s what passed through my mind when I sat in Evgenia’s nursery, where she had told the nanny to give me tea; I heard the doorbell ring, and a chambermaid ran in, full of joy, to tell the nanny, ‘Our prince has come to see us.’

“I got up right away, intending to go to the kitchen, but Tatiana, the nanny, was a talkative old Muscovite: she was terribly fond of saying everything she thought and was not going to be deprived of an audience, so she said, ‘Don’t go, Ivan Bighead: let’s go to the dressing room here and sit behind the wardrobe; she’ll never bring him here, and we can go on with our little talk.’

“So I agreed because I hoped that Tatiana, given her gossipy nature, would give me information that would be helpful for Grusha. Evgenia Semionovna had sent an eau de cologne vial of rum for me to have with my tea. I was now a teetotaler, so I thought I might as well drop it in the kindly old lady’s tea, and thanks to the vial, as we chatted, she might then in her good-natured way blurt out something she

wouldn't otherwise have said.

"We'd left the nursery and were sitting behind the wardrobes: the dressing room was narrow, no more than a corridor with a door at one end, and the door led to the room where Evgenia had received the prince, right to the sofa on which they were sitting. So all that separated me from them was a locked door, curtained on the other side; I could hear everything so well that I might as well have been in the same room as them.

"The prince came in and said, 'How are you, my old friend? Tried and tested!'

"She replied, 'How are you, prince? What brings you here?'

"He responded, 'We'll discuss that later; first of all, let's say hello and let me kiss your forehead.' I heard his lips deliver a kiss to her head; then he asked about their daughter. Evgenia Semionovna replied that the daughter was at home.

" 'Is she well?'

" 'She is.'

" 'I expect she's grown.'

"Evgenia laughed and replied, 'Of course she has.'

"The prince said, 'I hope you're going to let me see her.'

" 'Why not?' she replied. 'With great pleasure.' She got up, went to the nursery, and called the nanny, Tatiana, with whom I was having tea. 'Nanny, bring Liuda to see the prince.'

"Tatiana spat, put her saucer on the table, and said, 'Oh, the devil take the lot of you: I've only just sat down, ready for my tea and a talk with a friend, and they feel they have to interrupt everything and not let me do anything I enjoy!' She hastily covered me up with her mistress's skirts, which were hanging on the wall, and said, 'Stay here,' while she went off with the little girl. I was left on my own behind the wardrobes, then I heard the prince give the girl a couple of kisses, dandle her on his knees, and say, 'My little *enfant*, would you like a ride in the carriage?'

"The little girl was silent; the prince said to Evgenia Semionovna, '*Je vous prie*, please, let her and the nanny have a ride in my carriage.'

"Evgenia started saying something in French, *pourquoi* and why, but he answered with some words that seemed to mean 'it's essential.' They had two or three exchanges before Evgenia reluctantly told the nanny, 'Get her dressed and off you go.'

"The nanny and the girl left, the prince and Evgenia stayed, while I was a secret witness eavesdropping on them, because I couldn't escape from behind the wardrobes, and in any case I thought, 'Now's my chance to find out for certain if anyone has something bad in store for Grusha.' "

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"Once I'd decided to eavesdrop, I went further, since I wanted to see whatever I could with my own eyes. I succeeded by quietly standing on a stool and putting my eye close to the crack at the top of the doorframe. Below me, the prince was sitting on the sofa; the lady was standing by the window, probably looking at her daughter being helped into the carriage.

"The carriage had moved off; she turned around and said, 'Well, prince, I've done everything you wanted: now tell me what business brings you here to see me.'

"He replied, 'Don't talk about business! There's no urgency, that can wait. Come here, instead: sit with me and let's have a nice friendly chat, the way we used to.'

"The lady stood there, leaning against the window, her hands behind her back, silent and frowning. The prince asked, 'What's the matter with you? Please, I need to talk to you.'

"She did as he asked; when he saw her approach, he joked again, 'Come on, sit down as you used to.' He tried to put his arm around her but she moved it away and said, 'Come to the point, prince. How can I help you?'

" 'Why this tone?' asked the prince. 'So, must I set out the bare bones without any preliminaries?'

" 'Of course,' she said. 'State your business clearly. What is it? You and I know each other well; there's no reason to beat about the bush.'

" 'I need money,' said the prince. She looked at him in silence. 'Not a lot of money,' the prince added.

" 'How much?'

" 'Only about twenty thousand, now.'

"Again she said nothing; the prince launched himself into the details: 'I'm buying a cloth factory, but I don't have a penny. But if I buy it, I'll be a millionaire and I'll completely reorganize it; I'll get rid of all the old stuff, throw it out, and start making gaudy cloths to sell to the Asiatics at the Nizhny Novgorod

fair. I'll use the worst possible material for weaving, dye it in bright colors, it will all sell, and I'll make a lot of money. But now I need just twenty thousand rubles for the deposit.'

"Evgenia Semionovna asked, 'But where will you get the money?'

"The prince replied, 'I don't actually know, but I've got to get it. Anyway, I've made sure of my figures, and I have the man, Ivan Bighead. He used to be a regimental connoisseur, he's not the cleverest man on earth, but he's pure gold: honest, conscientious, and he's spent a long time among Asiatics as a captive and has a thorough knowledge of their tastes. The Makari fair at Nizhny is on, and I'll send Bighead there to win contracts and to get samples, there'll be deposits . . . then . . . the first thing I'll do is pay back the twenty thousand . . .'

"He fell silent, as did the lady, before uttering a sigh and commenting, 'You've worked it all out very well, prince.'

" 'I have, haven't I?'

" 'Very well indeed: this is what you'll do. You'll put a deposit on the factory, then people will consider you as a factory owner, and in society people will say that your affairs have improved . . .'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Yes, and then . . .'

" 'Bighead will take a lot of orders and deposits at the Makari fair, I'll pay back what I owe, and I'll be rich.'

" 'No, please don't interrupt: first of all, you will use all this to pull the wool over the lord lieutenant's eyes, and once he thinks you're a rich man, you'll marry his daughter, and then, when you've got her dowry, you really will be rich.'

" 'Is that what you think?'

"The lady replied, 'You don't think differently, do you?'

" 'Well,' the prince said, 'if you're so understanding, then God grant that, thanks to your lips, we can both have a taste of honey.'

" '*Both* of us?'

" 'Of course, we'll all be well-off: you'll mortgage the house for me now, and I'll give our daughter ten thousand rubles interest on the twenty thousand.'

"She replied, 'It's your house: you gave it to her as a present, so you can take it if you need it.'

"He tried to say, 'No, it's not mine; you're her mother, I'm asking you . . . of course, only provided that you trust me . . .'

"But she replied, 'Oh, do stop! Have I not trusted you before, prince? I entrusted you with my life and my good name.'

" 'Ah, yes, that's what you mean . . . Well, thank you, thank you, excellent . . . So I can send the mortgage documents to you tomorrow, and you'll sign them?'

" 'Send them, and I'll sign them.'

" 'You're not worried?'

" 'No. I've already lost so much that I needn't fear any more losses.'

" 'You don't feel regret? Tell me, don't you? You do still love me a little bit, don't you? Well? Or do you just wish things were different? Eh?'

"These words just made her laugh. She said, 'Stop talking rubbish, prince. Wouldn't you like me to have them serve you some cloudberries in syrup? Mine came out very well this year.'

"He must have felt offended: that was the last thing he was expecting. He stood up and smiled, saying, 'No. You eat your cloudberries; I can't be bothered with sweet things now. Thank you and goodbye.' He began kissing her hands, but meanwhile the carriage had come back.

"Evgenia Semionovna gave him her hand in parting. She said, 'And how on earth are you going to deal with your black-eyed Gypsy girl?'

"He suddenly clapped his hand to his forehead and shrieked, 'Oh, you're right! How clever you've always been! Believe it or not, I never forget how clever you are, and I'm grateful you've reminded me about that sapphire of mine!'

" 'Did you really,' she retorted, 'just forget about her?'

" 'Honest to God, I did. Out of sight, out of mind; but something really has to be sorted out for the little fool.'

" 'Sort things out,' replied Evgenia Semionovna, 'but do it properly: she's not a cool-blooded Russian woman, as lukewarm as fresh milk: she won't take demotion calmly; she won't let bygones be bygones.'

" 'Don't worry,' he replied, 'she'll calm down somehow.'

" 'Does she love you, Prince? Love you very much, as I'm told?'

" 'I couldn't be more fed up with her: but thank God, luckily for me, she and Bighead are great friends.'

“ ‘What good does that do you?’ asked Evgenia Semionovna.

“ ‘It’s fine: I’ll buy them a house, and register Ivan as a merchant; they can get married and have a life together.’

“Evgenia shook her head, smiled, and said, ‘Really, my little prince, my little wayward prince, have you no conscience?’

“ ‘Leave my conscience out of it, please. For God’s sake, I don’t have time for that now: I need to get hold of Ivan Bighead sometime today.’

“The lady told him that Ivan Bighead was in town; in fact, staying with her. The prince was overjoyed to hear this and ordered her to send me to him as soon as possible; he then left. After that everything happened with fairy-tale speed. The prince gave me lots of powers of attorney and certificates to say he had a factory, and he taught me what to say, what cloths he was manufacturing, and sent me straight from town to the Makari fair, so that I failed to see Grusha. All I could do was to feel offended when the prince said she would be my wife. At the Makari fair I got lucky: I took orders, money, and samples from the Asiatics, sent all the money to the prince, and went home, where I couldn’t recognize the place . . . Everything seemed to have been transformed by some magic spell: everything had been renovated, decorated like a peasant’s hut for a holiday, while there was not a trace of the quarters where Grusha had been staying: it had been leveled to the ground, and a new building put up there. I was aghast; I rushed off, searching for Grusha. Nobody knew anything about her. The servants were all newly hired and very haughty, so I no longer had access to the prince. Until then we had an army-style relationship, very straightforward; now it was all political and, if I had anything to say to the prince, it had to be through the butler.

“I found this so unbearable that I wasn’t going to stay a minute longer; I’d have left at once, except that I felt very sorry for Grusha and I was quite unable to find out where she had disappeared to. If I asked any of the former servants, they would say nothing: clearly, they had been strictly forbidden to speak. I managed to make one of the household’s old women tell me that Grusha had been there until recently, that it was only ten days or so since the prince had driven off with her in his carriage, and that she had not come back. I spoke to the coachmen who’d driven them; they refused to answer my questions. All they said was that the prince had changed horses at the post house and sent them back, while he and Grusha traveled on, using hired horses. I searched everywhere and found not a trace: that was it. Whether the villain had knifed her or shot her with his pistol and dumped her in some forest ditch, covering her with dry leaves, or had drowned her, a man of his passions was quite capable of anything. Grusha was an obstacle to his marriage, for Evgenia Semionovna was right to say that Grusha loved the villain with all her passionate Gypsy love, a love that would stop at nothing, and she wouldn’t have put up with it or submitted like Evgenia Semionovna, a Russian Christian who let her life smolder for him like an icon lamp. Gypsy fieriness had, I thought, flared up like a smoking bonfire in Grusha the moment he told her about the marriage; no doubt she then did something devilish, and he finished her off.

“I was more and more convinced of this, more and more certain that there was no other explanation: I couldn’t bear to watch any preparations for his wedding with the lord lieutenant’s daughter. When the wedding day came and all the servants were issued colorful scarves or new uniforms, according to their rank, I refused to put on a scarf or a uniform: I put them in my cupboard in the stables; in the morning I went to the forest and walked at random until evening, thinking all the time that I might come across her murdered body. When evening came, I left the forest, sat on the steep banks of the river: on the other side of the river the house was all ablaze with lights; the festivities were in full swing, the guests were enjoying themselves; you could hear from afar the music roaring out. I just sat there, looking not at the house but at the water where all this light was reflected: the stream rippled, and in the water it seemed as if columns were moving and submarine chambers were opening up. And I felt such sadness, such misery, worse than anything I had felt as a captive, that I began to talk with some invisible force and, as in the fairy story where a brother calls out for the orphaned princess Alionushka, I wailed for my poor orphaned Grusha: ‘My sister, Grusha! Answer me, call back, answer me: show yourself just for an instant!’ And would you believe it? I groaned like this three times, I began to feel horror, and I had the impression that somebody was running toward me, had reached me, was hovering around me, whispering in my ears, looking over my shoulder into my face, and suddenly something scrabbled out of the pitch-dark night onto me! It clung to my neck and thrashed around . . .”

“I was so terrified that I nearly fell to the ground, but I was still perfectly conscious and could sense something alive and lightweight around me, like a crane that had been shot: it was writhing and sighing, but not making a sound. I said a silent prayer and, lo and behold, I saw Grusha’s face right before mine.

“ ‘My darling,’ I said, “my sweet! Are you alive, or have you come to see me from the next world? It doesn’t matter, don’t hide anything, tell me the truth: even if you’re dead, poor orphan, I shan’t be frightened of you.’

“She heaved a very deep sigh, from the bottom of her heart, and said, ‘I’m alive.’

“ ‘Thank God,’ I said.

“ ‘But I’ve escaped here to die.’

“ ‘What are you saying, Grusha? Don’t even think of it. Why should you die? Let’s live and be happy, I’ll work for you and set up a special refuge for you, and you can live with me like a dearly loved sister.’

“She answered, ‘No, Ivan Severianych, no, my kind, dear close friend, accept an orphan’s humble reverence in exchange for your words; but I’m an ill-fated Gypsy, and I cannot live anymore, because otherwise I may kill an innocent soul.’

“I questioned her: ‘Who are you talking about? Whose soul are you lamenting?’

“She replied, ‘Hers, my villain’s young wife’s soul, because she’s young, totally innocent, but I have a jealous heart: I still can’t endure it, and I’ll destroy her and myself.’

“ ‘What are you saying! Cross yourself. You’ve been baptized. What will happen to your own soul?’

“ ‘No-o-o,’ she responded, ‘I won’t spare my own soul, either: let it go to hell. Being here is worse than hell!’

“I could see the woman had utterly broken down and her mind was like a madwoman’s: I took both of her hands and held them, while I looked her in the face and marveled at the terrible change in her. Where had all her beauty gone? She had lost her entire figure; all she had in her dark face were eyes that blazed like a wolf’s at night; those eyes seemed to have become twice as big. Her belly had swollen, because she was heavily pregnant, but her little face had shrunk to the size of a fist, and it was covered by her disheveled black tresses. I looked at the dress she was wearing: it was a dark cotton garment all in rags, and she wore no stockings.

“ ‘Tell me,’ I said, ‘how have you turned up here? Where have you been and why are you in such an unsightly state?’

“She suddenly smiled, saying, ‘What? What’s unsightly about me? I’m good-looking! This is how my beloved sweetheart has dressed me to reward my faithful love for him: for his sake I forgot the man I used to love and gave myself to him, utterly, without thought or hindsight, while he’s stuck me in a prison and put guards over me to keep a strict watch over my beauty . . .’ At this point she suddenly burst into loud laughter and then said with fury, ‘What a stupid little prince to think that locks and bolts would keep a Gypsy locked up. A Gypsy’s not a Russian miss. Any time I want, I can attack and tear out your young wife’s throat with my teeth.’

“I could see she was shaking all over with agonizing jealousy, and I thought I’d distract her from these thoughts not by fear of hellfire but by sweet memories, so I said, ‘All the same, he really did love you. How he loved you! How he used to kiss your feet . . . Sometimes, when you were singing, he’d kneel behind the sofa and kiss the top and the sole of your red shoe . . .’

“She started listening, and her black eyelashes brushed her dry cheek; she looked at the water and began to speak with a quiet, resonant voice. ‘He did love me, the villain did, nothing was too good for me, until I became fond of him, and when I fell in love with him, he dropped me. Why? Who is this woman who’s come between us? Is she better than me, will she love him more? He’s a fool, a fool! The sun in winter doesn’t warm you like the sun in summer, he won’t ever know love like mine: so go tell him that Grusha, when she was dying, put a spell on him and foretold his doom.’

“I was glad that she had started talking, so I persisted with my questions: ‘What happened between you, and what brought things to a head?’

“She clasped her hands together and said, ‘Oh, nothing caused it: it was sheer fickleness . . . He stopped fancying me, that’s the only reason.’ As she said all this, you know, she began to sob tearfully. ‘He had dresses made for me, the sort he liked, but that no pregnant woman needs: tight-fitting, with narrow waists; I’d put one on, and he’d get angry, saying, “Take it off; it doesn’t suit you.” If I didn’t put them on, but came out uncorseted, he’d be twice as annoyed and say, “What do you think you look like?” I realized then I would never get him back, that he found me repulsive now . . .’

“At this point she sobbed uncontrollably and, looking ahead, began whispering, ‘A long time ago I sensed that he’d stopped loving me; I just wanted to know if he had a conscience. I thought I’d try to not annoy him and wait until he showed me some pity, and this is the pity he showed . . .’

“Then she told me about the last time she parted from the prince: it was such a preposterous story that

I was at a loss, and even now I can't understand the reason why that treacherous man broke up with the woman forever."

18

"Grusha told me that for some time after I'd gone and disappeared, that is, when I set off for the Makari market, the prince still didn't come home; but, she said, she had already heard rumors that he was getting married. 'Those rumors made me cry a lot, and my face shriveled. I was sick at heart, and the baby was making me retch. I thought it was going to die in my womb. Then I suddenly heard people say he was coming. I was all aquiver. I rushed back to my quarters to put on my best clothes for him, I put on my emerald earrings and I pulled down from the wall his favorite dress, which was covered in a sheet: it was a light-blue watered silk, lace-trimmed dress, the bodice with a low neckline . . . I was in a hurry, I was putting it on, but the back wouldn't do up . . . so I didn't button the back, I just quickly tossed my scarlet shawl over it so he wouldn't see it was unbuttoned, and I leaped onto the porch to meet him. I was shaking, I was out of my mind, shouting out, "My golden man, my emerald, my sapphire!" and I put my arms around his neck and froze . . .'

"She then fainted. 'When I came to,' she said, 'I was in my bedroom. I was lying on the sofa, and I tried to remember everything. Did I have my arms around him, or was I dreaming?' But she was horribly weak and didn't see him for a long time. She kept sending for him, but he wouldn't come. Finally he did, and she asked, 'Have you completely abandoned and forgotten me?'

"He said, 'I've got business to see to.'

"She answered, 'What business? Why didn't you have any before? My diamond emerald!' and she stretched out her arms to embrace him, but he frowned and then jerked the cross around her neck with all his strength.

"'Fortunately,' she said, 'the silk cord around my neck wasn't strong: it was frayed and broken, because I'd hung an amulet on it some time ago; otherwise he would have choked me. Anyway, I reckon that's what he intended, because he'd turned all white and was hissing, "Why do you wear such filthy strings?"'

"'I told him, "What have you got against my cord? It was clean: it's all the grief that made me sweat and turn it black."

"'He spat in disgust, just spat and left. When it was getting dark he came in all angry and said, "Let's go for a ride in the carriage." He pretended to be affectionate and kissed my forehead; I wasn't worried, I got into the carriage and we drove off. We traveled a long way, we changed horses twice, but, although I kept asking, I couldn't find out where we were going; but I saw it was marshy, wooded country, grim and wild. We arrived in the middle of the forest at a beekeeper's place. Behind the hives was a farmyard and we were met there by three hefty girls, farmer's daughters, wearing madder-dyed red skirts; they called me "madam." When I got out of the carriage, they grabbed me by the arms and pretty well carried me off to a room that was all ready for me.

"'Somehow all this, and especially these farm girls, immediately made me feel nauseous; my heart sank. "What is this post house?" I asked him. He told me, "This is where you are now going to live." I started crying and kissing his hands, begging him not to leave me here; but he had no pity, he pushed me away and left.'

"At this point Grusha stopped, she lowered her face, sighed, and then said, 'I wanted to leave; I made a break for it a hundred times, but I couldn't, because these farm girls were watching, not taking an eye off me. I was at my wit's end, so I thought I'd put on an act and pretend that I was carefree, cheerful, that I wanted to have fun. They took me out to the forest but kept watching me, while I was looking at all the trees, the top branches and the bark, working out which direction was south; I thought of a way to escape from those girls, and last night I did so. After dinner I went with them to a clearing and told them, "Dear girls, let's run over the field playing hide-and-seek." They agreed. "And instead of blindfolding each other, let's tie our hands behind our backs so we can be caught from behind." They agreed to that, too.

"'So we went ahead. I tied the first girl's hands very tight behind her back, then ran off behind the bushes with another girl and tied her up there; when she yelled, the third girl came running and, in front of the others, I forced her hands behind her back and tied them. They were all yelling: pregnant or not, I bolted faster than a racehorse: I kept going through the forest; I ran all night, and in the morning I collapsed by some old beehive stumps in an overgrown barricade of felled trees. An ancient old man came up to me; he said something, but it was toothless mumbling; he was covered in beeswax, which

made him smell of honey, and bees were squirming in his yellow eyebrows. I told him I wanted to see you, Ivan Severianych, and he replied, “Call out to him, young woman, once into the wind, once against the wind: he’ll feel a longing for you and come looking, and you’ll meet.” He gave me a drink of water and a gherkin with honey to keep up my strength. I drank the water and ate the gherkin, and went off again, calling for you all the time, as he told me, into the wind and against the wind: and we’ve met. Thank you!’

“She embraced me, kissed me, and said, ‘You’re as good as a dearly loved brother to me.’

“I said, ‘And you’re as good as a dearly loved sister to me.’ I was so overcome that I was crying too.

“She said as she wept, ‘Ivan Severianych, I know and understand everything: you’re the only man who’s loved me, my dear friend, my sweet one. Now you must prove to me how much you love me: do what I ask at this dreadful hour.’

“ ‘Speak,’ I replied. ‘What do you want?’

“ ‘No, first you must swear the most frightful oath in the world, that you will do what I’m going to ask.’

“I swore to her by the salvation of my soul, but she said, ‘That’s not enough: you’ll do more for my sake. No, swear by something even more terrible.’

“ ‘Well, I can’t think of anything more terrible than that.’

“ ‘Well, I’ve thought of something you can swear by; repeat after me, speak and don’t think.’

“I stupidly promised, and she said, ‘Swear by my soul as you would swear by your own if you don’t obey.’

“ ‘All right,’ I said, and I swore by her soul.

“ ‘Now listen,’ she said, ‘you can quickly be the savior of my soul; I haven’t got the strength to go on living in agony, now that I see his treachery and his abuse of me. If I live just one more day, I’ll murder both *him* and *her*, but if I spare them, I’ll kill myself and doom my soul to eternal perdition . . . Have pity on me, my dearest, my sweet brother: stab my heart once with your knife.’

“I jumped back from her and made the sign of the cross; I was backing away, but she wrapped her arms around my knees, weeping, then bowed down to my feet and implored me. ‘You will go on living, you’ll get forgiveness for my soul and for your own by praying to God; but don’t damn my soul by letting me kill myself . . . No-o-ow . . .’ ”

Ivan Severianych furrowed his brow in a terrifying way; he bit his mustache, and then said, as if emptying the depths of his gaping chest, “She took the knife out of my pocket . . . unfolded it . . . straightened the blade out of the handle . . . and thrust it into my hands . . . As for her . . . she was carrying on, saying things that were too much to bear . . . ‘If you don’t kill me,’ she said, ‘I’ll have my revenge on you all by becoming the most depraved of women.’

“I shook all over; I ordered her to say her prayers, but I didn’t stab her, I just pushed her off the cliff into the river.”

Listening to this last confession, for the first time we all wondered if Ivan Severianych’s stories were true; we were silent for quite a long time, but finally someone cleared his throat and asked, “Did she drown?”

“She went under the water,” Ivan Severianych replied.

“What did you do next?”

“What do you mean?”

“I expect you suffered badly.”

“Of course I did, sir.”

19

“I fled, I ran away, I was out of my mind; all I remember is feeling I was being chased by someone horribly big and long, shameless, naked, with a black body and a head no bigger than a sickle head, but his whole figure was large and hairy. I guessed that this was either Cain or the destroyer of souls, so I kept running away from him, calling on my guardian angel. When I came to my senses, I found I was on the highway, under a willow tree. It was a dry, sunny autumn day, but it was cold, and the wind blew the dust about and yellow leaves were swirling around; I didn’t know what time it was, where I was, or where the road went to; my mind was utterly empty of feelings or intentions or ideas of what to do. All I could think of was that Grusha’s soul was now damned and it was my duty to suffer for her sake and save her from hell. But I didn’t know how to do that, and I was in anguish. Then suddenly something touched my shoulder: when I looked, I saw a dead branch had fallen from the willow—it rolled off, far away, and suddenly it was Grusha walking, but she was very small, as if no older than six or seven, and she had

little wings on her shoulders. The moment I spotted her, she flew off like a shot, and all that was left was a flurry of dust and dry leaves in her wake.

"I thought that this must be her soul following me, that she was luring me on to show me the way. So I walked on. All day I walked, I don't know where, and I exhausted myself; when suddenly two people, an old man and an old woman, riding a cart pulled by two horses, caught up with me and said, 'Take a seat, poor man: we'll help you on your way.'

"I got onto the cart. As they drove, they complained bitterly. 'We're very unfortunate: our son's being recruited into the army, but we don't have any money, so we can't hire a substitute.'

"I felt sorry for the old couple, so I told them, 'I'd be happy to take his place for you, without payment, but I haven't got any papers.'

"They said, 'That doesn't matter: let us deal with that; you just have to call yourself our son Piotr Serdiukov.'

" 'Fine then,' I replied, 'I don't care. I'll pray to my own guardian angel and namesake John the Baptist, but I can call myself any name you like.'

"So we agreed, and they drove me to another town and handed me, instead of their son, over to the army; they gave me twenty-five rubles in silver for my journey, and even promised to help me for the rest of their lives. I immediately offered the money, the twenty-five rubles, to a poor monastery to pray for Grusha's soul, and then asked the authorities to send me to the Caucasus where I could most easily die for the faith. They sent me there, and I served more than fifteen years in the Caucasus and never told anyone my real name or profession; I just called myself Piotr Serdiukov and only on Saint John's day did I pray to John the Baptist and thus to God for my own soul. By now I'd forgotten all about my former life and profession, and I was serving my last year, when one day, Saint John's day, we were pursuing Tatars, who had done a lot of foul things and then crossed the Koisu River. There are several Koisus around there: one flows through Andi country and is called the Andi Koisu, one flows through Avar country and is called the Avar Koisu, and there are the Korikumu and Kuzikumu Koisus—they join together to become the Sulak. But all these Koisus are just as fast flowing and cold, especially the Andi Koisu, which the Tatars had crossed. We'd killed more of these Tatars than we could count, but the ones that got away across the Koisu had dug in behind rocks and whenever we showed ourselves, they opened fire. They fired very cleverly, so as not to waste their ammunition; they saved their powder for when they could cause damage, because they knew that we had far more ammunition than they did, and they were so underhanded that while we were standing in full sight, they never once let anything off at us. We had a colonel who was frightened of nothing and liked to act as if he were General Suvorov, saying 'God have mercy!' all the time and making an example of his bravery. So he sat down there on the riverbank, took off his boots, and put his legs up to the knees in the freezing water, boasting, 'God have mercy! The water's warm, just like milk fresh from the cow. Which of you good fellows is willing to swim to the other side and fix a cable so that we can make a bridge?'

"The colonel sat there nattering with us; on the other side the Tatars poked two rifle barrels through a crack in the rocks but didn't shoot. Only when two soldiers volunteered and started swimming was there a flash of fire and both those soldiers went under the Koisu waters. We pulled back the cable, sent another couple of soldiers, and we showered the rocks where the Tatars were hiding with a swarm of bullets, but we couldn't get them because our bullets hit rock, and those devils only had to spit at our swimmers for the water to turn red with blood. We sent a third couple, too; they got no farther than halfway across the Koisu, when the Tatars drowned them. There weren't many volunteers now after the third couple, because everyone could see this wasn't war, it was just murder. Yet the murderers had to be punished. So the colonel said, 'Listen, my good fellows. Would there be one of you who has a mortal sin on his conscience? God have mercy, wouldn't it be good for him to wash away his lawlessness with his own blood?'

"And I thought, 'What better chance could I have to end my life? Lord, bless this hour of mine!' I stepped forward and undressed. I said the Lord's Prayer, bowed to the ground in all directions, to the commanding officers and my comrades, and told myself, 'Well, Grusha, my adopted sister, accept my blood!' Then I held in my mouth a thin cord (the other end was tied to the cable), took a running jump off the riverbank, and plunged into the water.

"The water was horribly cold: it stung me even under the armpits, and my chest went numb, my legs were seized with cramps, but I swam on . . . Our bullets were flying overhead, the Tatar bullets were splashing into the water but missing me. I didn't know whether I was hit or not, but I reached the other side . . . Once I was there, the Tatars couldn't get me, because I was right by the gully and, if they wanted to fire at me, they had to poke their heads out of their cracks, and our men were covering those cracks with bullets like a shower of sand. So I was standing underneath the rocks, pulling on the cable; I

stretched it out, the bridge was put in place, and suddenly our men were coming over, while I was still standing there, as if outside myself, not understanding a thing, because I was wondering if anyone had seen what I had seen. What I saw when I was swimming was Grusha flying over me, she was like a young maiden of about sixteen, but with enormous bright wings, big enough to cover the width of the river, protecting me with them . . . But I could see nobody was going to mention them. Well, I thought, I'd better tell them myself. The colonel made to embrace me, kissing and praising me, saying, 'God have mercy! What a hero you are, Piotr Serdiukov!'

"I answered, 'Your Excellency, I'm no hero, I'm a great sinner, and I have been rejected by the earth and by the water.'

"He asked me, 'What was your sin?'

"I told him, 'Over my life I've killed a lot of innocent souls.' At night, in the tent, I told him everything I've told you.

"He listened and listened, then pondered, and said, 'God have mercy, what a lot you have had to endure, but the point is, my good fellow, that you have to be promoted. I'm going to send a recommendation.'

"I said, 'As you wish, sir, but please send them a request for proof that I am telling the truth that I killed a Gypsy girl.'

" 'All right,' he said, 'I'll put that in my dispatch, too.'

"So the dispatch was sent, but the papers went from one place to another and came back wrong. It was explained that they'd never had information about any such incident with a Gypsy girl, and while Ivan Severianych did work for a prince, he left with a written emancipation from serfdom, whereafter he died in the house of the Serdiukovs, who were state peasants.

"What else could I now do to prove my guilt? The colonel said, 'Don't dare, my man, invent any more nonsense about yourself: you swam the Koisu, the cold water and the fear have disturbed your mind a little, so I am very pleased on your behalf, because these are all lies that you have blackened yourself with. Now you're going to be an officer: my good man, God have mercy, that's very good.'

"This was confusing even for me. Had I really pushed Grusha into the water, or was it my terrible longing for her that had affected my strong imagination? So they made me an officer for my bravery, but as I kept insisting on the truth and on revealing my past life, they wanted no more trouble from me and retired me with a Saint George medal.

" 'Congratulations,' I was told. 'Now you're a gentleman and you can have a career as a government official. God have mercy, what a relief.' The colonel handed me a letter to give to an important person in Petersburg. 'Off you go: he'll see to your career and well-being.' I took the letter with me to Petersburg, but I had no luck with my career."

"Why not?"

"I spent a very long time with no job, and then I ended up on *theta*, which made things even worse."

"What do you mean, 'on *theta*'? What does that mean?'

"The patron I'd been sent to for my career got me a job as an information assistant in the address bureau: each assistant is given an initial letter for the names being searched. Some letters are very good, for instance *b*, or *p*, or *k*: there are a lot of surnames beginning with those letters, and the assistant gets a good income. But I'd been given *theta*. It's the most useless letter; very few surnames begin with it, and even people with names that should be written with a *theta* wriggle out of it or are underhanded: anyone who wants to sound more dignified immediately swaps, without asking, his *theta* for an *f*. You can search all day under *theta*, it's just a waste of effort, because he's renamed himself with an *f*. It's all pointless, but you have to sit there in the office. Well, I could see that this was hopeless, so I started looking for work in my old line, as a coachman, but nobody would take me on. They told me, you're an officer and a gentleman, and you have a military medal, it would be awkward to swear at you or hit you. I might as well go and hang myself, but, thank God, I didn't let my despair get that far and, so as not to starve to death, I went off to be a performer."

"What kind of performer were you, then?"

"I acted various parts."

"At what theater?"

"At the street theater on Admiralty Square. People there don't mind if you're gentry; they take on anyone: there are officers, chief clerks, students, and, especially, a lot of Senate House clerks."

"Did you like the life?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"First of all, learning your lines and rehearsals are done during Easter Week or just before Shrove

Tuesday, when people at church are singing ‘Open the doors of repentance for me,’ and, second, I had a very difficult part.”

“What was it?”

“I acted the devil.”

“What was so difficult about that?”

“How could it not be hard? I had to dance and do somersaults in two scenes, and somersaults were terribly awkward because I was stitched up in a shaggy goatskin, fur outward, and I had a long tail attached by a wire that constantly tripped my feet up, and the horns on my head caught on anything nearby; I was getting on now, not a young man anymore, and I’d lost my nimbleness. What’s more, the script said I had to be beaten all through the show. That was an awful bore. The sticks might be lightweight, made of canvas stuffed with cotton, but it’s still terribly tiresome to put up with them, being thumped and slapped all the time, and some actors, either in cold blood or as a joke, would find ways of hitting you so it hurt. Especially the Senate House clerks, who knew how to do it and connived with one another. They stood up for one another, and if they came across any military men, whom they loathed, they’d give them a thorough beating in front of the audience, starting at noon, when the police raised their flag to signal the start of a performance. Then they’d beat you until midnight and any of them who wanted to amuse the audience would do his best to thump you noisily. That was no fun at all. To cap it off, things ended badly for me here, too, and as a result I had to stop acting.”

“What could have happened to you?”

“I gave a prince a walloping.”

“A prince?”

“Not a real one, a theatrical one: he was a Senate clerk, a mere collegiate registrar, but he played a prince in our theater.”

“Why did you wallop him?”

“That was the least he deserved. He liked making fools of people, he lied, and he thought up tricks to play on everyone.”

“On you too?”

“Me too, sir. He played a lot of tricks: he ruined my costume; he’d creep up on me in the room where we warmed ourselves over a charcoal fire and drank tea, and tie my tail to my horns, or do some other stupid thing to get a laugh, and I didn’t turn my head, so I’d run onto the stage and the boss would get angry. I let him get away with what he did to me, then he suddenly started being nasty to a fairy. She was a very young girl, impoverished gentry, and she acted the goddess Fortune and she was supposed to save the prince from my clutches. Her part meant she had to come out wearing just shiny tulle and wings, but it was terribly cold and her poor hands turned completely blue and numb, so he would pester her, not leave her alone, and at the climax in the final scene, when the three of us fell down into the pit, he would pinch her body. I felt very sorry for her, so I roughed him up.”

“How did that end, then?”

“It was fine: there were no witnesses in the pit except for the fairy. But all the Senate House clerks rebelled and refused to have me in the troupe, and as they were the best actors, the boss sacked me to satisfy them.”

“Where could you go after that?”

“I might have been left with nothing to eat and no roof over my head, if that good fairy hadn’t fed me, but I felt embarrassed because the poor girl had such a hard time herself, so I thought long and hard how to get out of this quandary. I refused to go back to my *theta*; in any case, some other poor fellow was sitting there suffering in my place, so I just went off to a monastery.”

“Was that the only reason?”

“What could I do? I had nowhere else to go. And life was good in the monastery.”

“So you got to like monastic life?”

“Very much so, I did, sir. Life here is peaceful, just like in the regiment, very similar: everything’s done for you—you’re clothed, shod, fed, and the authorities keep an eye on you and expect obedience.”

“Didn’t you ever find obedience hard to put up with?”

“Why should I, sir? The more obedient he is, the easier it is for a man to live in peace; I had nothing to resent, especially as a novitiate. I only go to church services if I myself want to; I just carry out my usual duties: if I’m ordered, ‘Harness the horses, Father Izmail’ (I’m now called Izmail), I harness them; if I’m told, ‘Father Izmail, unharness the horses,’ I unharness them.”

“Just a minute,” we asked. “What is all this? Did you even in the monastery continue . . . working with horses?”

“Always a coachman. Nobody in the monastery is bothered that I used to be an officer, because

although I'm only a novitiate, a postulant, as a monk I'm on the same footing as everyone else."

"Will you be taking the full vows and tonsure soon, then?"

"I won't, sir."

"Why is that?"

"Well . . . I don't consider myself worthy."

"Is that because of your old sins or the errors of your ways?"

"Mmm, yes, sir. In any case, why should I? I'm very happy to be a novitiate and I have an untroubled life."

"Have you ever told anyone your life story before, as you've told it to us?"

"Of course I have, sir, several times. But what's the point when you've got no paperwork . . . nobody believes you, so I've brought worldly lies into the monastery, too, and here I'm considered to be gentry. But I might as well go on living like this: I'm getting too old."

The enchanted wanderer's story, clearly, was coming to its end; there was only one thing we needed to satisfy our curiosity. What happened to him in the monastery?

20

Since our wanderer's story had sailed to his life's final haven, the monastery that he was profoundly convinced had been his predestination since birth, and since everything in that monastery was apparently so very favorable to him, we naturally assumed that Ivan Severianych would not meet with further misadventures there. But we turned out to be completely wrong. One of our fellow travelers recalled that monks, according to all the tales told about them, constantly suffered a great deal from the devil. He asked, "Tell us, please, didn't the devil tempt you in the monastery? They say, don't they, that he constantly tempts monks?"

Ivan Severianych furrowed his brow, looked calmly at his questioner, and replied, "Of course he tempts us, how could he not? Clearly, if Paul the apostle himself couldn't avoid the devil and writes in his epistle that 'there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me,' then how could I, a weak, sinful man, not endure his torments?"

"What did he make you endure?"

"A great deal, sir."

"What sort of thing?"

"A lot of different nasty things: at first, before I overcame him, there were even temptations."

"You mean you overcame *him*, the devil himself, as well?"

"How else could I have acted, sir? In the monastery that's a special vocation, but, to be honest, I couldn't have done it on my own; a fully qualified senior monk taught me how, because he was experienced and able to cure any temptation. When I confessed to him that Grusha kept appearing to me, so lifelike that she seemed to fill the whole air around me, he immediately gave it some thought and told me, 'James the apostle said, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." You must resist, likewise.' And he instructed me how to act: 'Whenever you feel your heart softening and you recall her, then you must understand that this is the messenger of Satan approaching, and then you must prostrate yourself for a deed of mortification against Satan. First of all, kneel down: a man's knees are his first tool, for when you kneel down, your soul immediately soars up and you too are elevated; then bow down to the ground as hard as you can, to the point of utter exhaustion, and enfeeble yourself with fasting so as to kill feeling, then the devil will see your determined act of mortification and will find it unbearable and quickly back away, because he fears his cunning ploys may bring a person like you even more directly to Christ. He will think, "Better to leave him and not tempt him, and hope that he'll forget about it sooner." ' That's what I started doing, and in fact it all went away."

"Did you torment yourself like that for a long time, before Satan's messenger backed off?"

"For a long time, sir. I tackled the enemy of mankind just by starving him out, because that's the only thing he's afraid of. At first I bowed to the ground a thousand times and I didn't eat or drink water for four days at a time: then *he* understood that he was no match for me, lost heart, and weakened. The moment he saw me throw my bowl of food out of the window and pick up my rosary to count the bows, he realized that I wasn't joking, that I was prostrating myself for mortification, and he'd run away. After all, he's terribly afraid in case he inspires a man with the joy of hopes of salvation."

"But all the same, let's suppose it was *hi*m . . . So, you may have overcome *him*, but what about all the things he made you endure?"

"That's nothing, sir. What does it matter: I was oppressing the oppressor; I wasn't causing any harm to

myself."

"And are you now completely free of *him*?"

"Completely, sir."

"Does he never appear to you at all?"

"He never comes in the form of a seductive woman; if he does occasionally show himself, then it's in a corner of the cell, but in the most miserable form: he squeals like a dying piglet. I don't ever torment the villain anymore, I just make the sign of the cross and bow to the ground and he stops his grunting."

"Well, thank God you managed to deal with all this."

"Yes, I did. I overcame the greater devil's temptations, but let me tell you, although it's against the rules, I had more trouble from the petty demons and their vile tricks."

"Did petty demons bother you, too?"

"Of course, sir. They may be the lowest ranking and the most contemptible, but they never stop pestering . . ."

"What do they do to you?"

"They're just brats, and in hell there are an awful lot of them, and as they don't have to work for a living, they haven't got anything to do, so they ask if they can come up to earth to learn how to trouble people; they fool around, and the more a man tries to treat his vocation seriously, the more they try to annoy him."

"Give us an example of how they might annoy someone."

"For instance, they'd trip you up with something, or put something in your path so you knock it over or smash it and thus upset and infuriate somebody else: that's their main pleasure—it's fun. Then they clap their hands and go to their senior devil to say, 'We've upset people, so give us a penny.' That's what they're after . . . Children."

"And how do they actually manage to upset you, for example?"

"Well, for instance, we once had a Jew who hanged himself in the forest near the monastery, and all the novitiate monks started saying it was Judas and that he was going around the cells at night, sighing: a lot of them witnessed the ghost. But I wasn't at all bothered by him, because in my opinion there are still plenty of Jews left around us, aren't there? But I was asleep one night in the stables and I suddenly heard someone approach, stick his nose through the top of the doorframe, and sigh. I said a prayer, but he was still there. I made the sign of the cross; he was still there, and he sighed again. 'All right,' I said to myself, 'what can I do to you? I can't pray for you, because you're a Jew, and even if you weren't a Jew, I haven't got the grace needed to pray for suicides, so get away from me and go to the forest or the wilderness.' I put this spell on him and he retreated. I went back to sleep, but the next night the swine came back and sighed . . . he stopped me sleeping, that was the trouble. I tried to put up with it, but couldn't. Damn you, you oaf, I thought, was the forest too small or was there no room on the church porch that he absolutely had to break into the stables where I slept? Well, I could see that there was no way to stop him unless I devised an effective means, so the next day I took a piece of charcoal and drew a large cross on the door. When night came, I calmly went to bed, thinking he wouldn't come now, but no sooner had I fallen asleep with that thought than he was standing there again, sighing. Damn you, you convict, nothing works with you! The whole night through he was trying to scare me, and in the morning, when the first bell tolled for matins, I got up as fast as I could and ran to complain to the father superior: I was met by the bell ringer, Brother Diomid, who asked, 'Why are you looking so scared?'

"I told him the whole story, about being disturbed all night, and said I was going to see the father superior. But Brother Diomid replied, 'Forget it, don't go, the father superior has put a leech up his nose and is now *very irritable* and he won't give you any help. But, if you like, I can help you far better than he can.'

"I said, 'I don't care in the least, but for heaven's sake, help me: if you do I'll give you an old pair of warm gauntlets and they'll be very good for bell ringing in winter.'

"'All right,' he replied. So I gave him the gauntlets, and from the bell tower he brought me an old church door that had a picture of Peter the apostle holding the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

"'The most important thing about this,' he said, 'is the *keys*: just put up this door as a barrier, and nobody will pass through it.'

"I almost bowed to the ground in thanks and joy, thinking how I could hang the door and then unhang it; I thought it would be best to make a solid job of it, to make sure it was a permanent barrier, so I fixed it on the most reliable solid hinges, and to make extra sure, I fashioned the heaviest possible doorstop out of a cobblestone. I assembled all that in one day, before night fell, and when it did, I went to bed at the proper time and slept. But what would you think? I heard him breathing again. I simply couldn't believe my ears, it wasn't possible, but it was: he was breathing, nothing less, and what's more, pushing

at the door. The old door could be locked from the inside, but I hadn't fixed a lock to this door as I was relying on its sanctity, and there'd been no time, either. He was shoving so hard, getting bolder with every moment, and finally I could see his nose poking through. Then the door was flung open against the doorstop and bounced off it violently. He jumped back; clearly he'd bruised himself, but after waiting a little, he was even bolder and again I saw the nose and the doorstop banged even harder. It must have hurt him, because he calmed down and stopped trying to push in, so I went back to sleep. But it wasn't long before the scoundrel goes back to his tricks, this time more artfully. He didn't butt and just push, he gently prized the door apart with his horns and, as I had my fur jacket over my head, the brazen devil suddenly ripped the jacket off me and licked my ear. I wasn't going to put up with any more of this insolence: I reached under the bed, grabbed an ax, and whacked him: I heard him bellow and just flop to the ground. 'Well,' I thought, 'you got what was coming to you.' In the morning, however, when I looked, there was no Jew: instead of a Jew, those vile petty demons had set me up with the monastery's cow."

"And you'd wounded it, had you?"

"I'd hacked it to death with my ax, sir! There was terrible trouble in the monastery."

"I imagine you must have had some unpleasantness because of that, didn't you?"

"I did, sir. The abbot said that I imagined all this because I went to church so seldom, and his blessed order was that I should always, once I'd dealt with the horses, stand in front of the altar grid ready to light the candles. But that was where these nasty petty demons had even more fun tripping me up and finally got me into real trouble. At the all-night service just before the Feast of the Savior on the Waters, when the ripening grain is blessed, when the abbot and the priest monk are standing, as the rules dictate, in the middle of the church, an elderly pilgrim woman hands me a candle and says, 'Place it, Father, in honor of the feast.' I went up to the icon stand, where the Savior on the Waters was laid, and started sticking in this candle. But I dropped another candle. I bent down, picked it up, and started sticking it back in, and then I dropped two more. I tried to put them back, and I saw I'd dropped four. I just shook my head: I thought it must be those little scoundrels trying to upset me by ripping the candles out of my hands. I bent down and quickly got up with all the candles that had fallen, and I banged my head against the candle holder . . . all the candles were strewn about. Now I got really angry and knocked down all the other candles with my hand. 'All right,' I thought, 'if they've started this insolence, I'd better spill the lot myself in one go.' "

"What happened to you because of that?"

"They were going to have me up in court for that, but old Sysoi, a blind hermit who lived in a cell made of earth, put in a word for me. 'What are you going to try him for, when it was the messengers of Satan who troubled him?'

"The abbot took his advice and gave his blessed order that I should be put, without trial, into an empty cellar."

"Were you a prisoner in the cellar for a long time?"

"The abbot's blessed order didn't say for how long: the order was just to imprison me, and I stayed there all summer until the first morning frosts."

"I imagine the boredom and agony in the cellar must have been as bad as in the steppes, mustn't it?"

"Not at all, sir. How could you compare them? Here you can hear the church bells, and my fellow monks visited me. They'd come and stand over the pit, and we'd have a talk, and the monastery treasurer had a millstone lowered on a rope for me to grind salt for the monastery. There's no comparison with the steppes or anywhere else."

"How about when you were released? Presumably when the frosts started, because it was too cold."

"No, sir. That's not why. Not the cold but for a completely different reason, since I'd begun to prophesy."

"To prophesy?"

"Yes, sir. In the cellar: in the end I became obsessed with the thought of the utter uselessness of my spirit, how much suffering it had caused me, so that I never saw anything through to the end; so I sent a novitiate to one of our elder teacher monks with a question: Could I ask God to let me have a different, more befitting spirit? The elder ordered me to be told, 'Let him pray as he ought to and then expect the unexpected.'

"That's what I did: three nights in a row I spent on my knees, my only means of salvation, in my pit, while my spirit prayed to heaven and I began to expect something new to take place in my soul. We had another monk, Geronti, who was very well-read and kept various books and newspapers: once he gave me the *Life of the Blessed Tikhon of Zadonsk* to read, and when he happened to be passing my pit, he would always take a newspaper from under his cassock and throw it to me. 'Read it,' he would say, 'and look for something useful: that will take your mind off things in the pit.'

“While I was waiting for the impossible event of my prayers being answered, I started filling the time with reading. When I’d ground all the salt I was given to grind, I began to read; first of all, I read about the blessed Tikhon being visited in his cell by the Virgin Mary and the holy apostles Peter and Paul. It was written that Tikhon, beloved of God, then began to ask the Virgin for the continuation of peace on earth, but the apostle Paul responded with loud words, telling him the sign that peace was at an end: ‘For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them.’ I began to ponder these apostolic words at length; at first I couldn’t understand at all what the apostle was revealing to the saint in such words. After this I read in the newspapers that general peace was being continuously proclaimed on everyone’s lips, both in Russia and abroad. That was the moment that my request was answered, and I suddenly realized that what had been predicted was imminent: ‘For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them.’ I was seized with fear for our Russian nation and I began to pray; I beseeched with tears everyone who visited me in my pit to pray that all our various enemies and foes should be subdued by the foot of our Tsar, for sudden destruction was coming upon us. And I had the gift of tears, torrents of tears! I kept weeping for the motherland. The abbot was informed: ‘Our Izmail in the cellar has started weeping a great deal and prophesying war.’ The abbot’s blessed response to this was that I should be moved to an empty hut in the kitchen garden and given to contemplate an icon of the *Blessed Silence*, which depicts the Savior with an angel’s folded wings but wearing the crown of Sabaoth instead of a crown of thorns, and with his hands humbly crossed over his chest. I was ordered to bow down every day to this icon until my prophetic spirit fell silent. So they locked me up with this icon, and I stayed a prisoner in that hut until spring, constantly praying to the *Blessed Silence*, but the moment I saw another human being, the spirit would arise in me again and I would speak. Now the abbot sent a doctor to take a look at me and see whether I was mentally deranged. The doctor spent some time sitting with me in the hut, listening to my life story, like you. He gave up on me: ‘Brother, you’re just like a drum: they keep on beating you, but they can’t finish you off.’

“I said, ‘What can I do? I suppose that’s how it has to be.’

“When he’d heard everything, the doctor told the abbot, ‘I can’t make head or tail of him. Is he just a harmless fellow, has he gone mad, or is he really a prophet? That’s your specialty, I’m not competent to judge, but my opinion is that you should send him as far away as possible; let him run around, perhaps he’s been stuck here too long.’

“So they let me go, and now I’ve been blessed to make my way as a pilgrim to the Zosima and Savvati monastery on the Solovetsky Islands. I’ve been everywhere, but I haven’t seen Zosima and Savvati, and I want to pay my respects before I die.”

“What do you mean ‘before you die’? You’re not ill, are you?”

“No, sir, I’m not. But it’s for the same reason: soon we’ll have to go to war.”

“Come on, you can’t be talking about war again, can you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“So the *Blessed Silence* didn’t do you any good, then?”

“I can’t say, sir. I make an effort to stay silent, but the spirit overcomes me.”

“What does the spirit say?”

“It keeps on urging the same thing, ‘Take up arms!’ ”

“Surely you don’t intend to go to war yourself?”

“What else, sir? Definitely: I very much want to die for my nation.”

“How can you? Will you go to war in a cowl and cassock?”

“No, sir: I’ll take my cowl off and put on an ammunition tunic.”

After these words the enchanted warrior seemed to sense the spirit of prophesy descend on him once more; he fell into a state of quiet concentration, which none of his collocutors would dare interrupt with more questions. And what else could we have asked him about? In narrating his past he had given a full account with all the frankness of his simple soul. But his prophesies remain for the time being in the hands of Him who has hidden these things from the wise and prudent and only occasionally has revealed them unto babes.

1873

Translated by Donald Rayfield

THE STEEL FLEA

The Tale of the Cross-Eyed, Left-Handed Gunsmith from Tula and the Steel Flea

1

WHEN EMPEROR Alexander the First had finished the Council of Vienna[1] he decided he would like to take a trip around Europe and look at the marvels in the different countries. He traveled through all the nations, and everywhere his friendliness always helped him get into the most intimidating conversations with all kinds of people, and everybody would amaze him with one thing or another and try to win him over to their side. But along with him was the Don Cossack Platov,[2] who didn't like all this persuasion; he hankered to get back to his farm, and he kept trying to talk the Emperor into going home. And if Platov noticed the Emperor getting really interested in something foreign, then just as soon as all the guides stopped talking for a minute, Platov would pop up and say this, that, and the other, telling them ours at home was just as good, and one way or another he would get their minds onto something else.

The Englishmen knew this, and they thought up all kinds of shifty tricks for the Emperor's visit, so as to get him in their power with their outlandishness and get his mind off the Russians, and in a lot of cases they managed it, especially at their big meetings, where Platov couldn't say everything completely in French. But then he was not very much interested in that, since he was a married man and looked on all French conversations as trifles not worthy of serious imagination. And when the Englishmen started inviting the Emperor into all their storehouses, gun works, and soapy-rope factories, so as to show how much better they were than us in everything and then brag about it, Platov said to himself, "Well, this has gone far enough. I've put up with it so far, but I can't take any more. Maybe I'll succeed and maybe I'll fail, but at least I won't go back on my own people."

And he had no sooner said this to himself than the Emperor told him, "Tomorrow you and I are going to look at their military museum. There they've got such natures of perfection that just as soon as you've seen them you'll agree that we Russians with our significance don't mean a thing."

Platov said nothing in reply to the Emperor but just stuck his humpbacked nose down into his shaggy felt overcoat and went to his room. He told his orderly to get a bottle of Caucasian grape vodka out of their traveling supplies. He gulped down a big glassful, said his prayers before the folding traveling icon, covered himself with his overcoat, and started snoring such a time that none of the Englishmen in the whole house could get any sleep.

He thought, "Wait until the morning light; it's always wiser than the night."

2

The next day the Emperor and Platov went to the museums. The Emperor took none of his other Russians with him, because the carriage they gave him was only a two-sitter.

They came to a great big building, with an entrance beyond description, corridors beyond measure, and one room after another, until at last they came into the biggest hall of all, with tremendulous estuaries, and right in the middle, under a canoply, stood the Apollo Velvet Ear.[3]

The Emperor glanced around sideways at Platov to see what he was looking at and whether he was very much amazed, but Platov was walking along with his eyes looking down at the ground as if he didn't see anything, and he was only winding his mustaches into rings.

The Englishmen started at once to show off all sorts of marvels and explain how everything in them was fitted together with everything else for military circumstances. There were nautical whether-meters, gamblehair coats for the infantry, and waterproof reincoats for the cavalry. The Emperor was glad to see all this, and he thought everything looked very good, but Platov held his impatience and said it all didn't mean a thing for him.

The Emperor said, "How is that possible? How can you be so unfeeling? Doesn't anything at all impress you here?"

And Platov replied, "Just one thing impresses me here: my Don River boys fought without all this and drove out old Bony Part."

The Emperor said, "That's just prejudunce."

Platov answered, "I don't know what to call it, but I ain't allowed to argue so I'll keep quiet."

The Englishmen, seeing this exchange between the Emperor and Platov, at once took him up to the statue of Apollo Velvet Ear itself and took a Mortimer rifle out of one hand and a pistol out of the other.

"Here's the kind of production we've got," they said, and they handed him the rifle.

The Emperor looked calmly at the Mortimer rifle, because he had some like it at home in his Summer Palace, and then they handed him the pistol and said, "This is a pistol of unknown and inimitable workmanship. Our admiral snatched it off the belt of a robber chieftain at Candelabria."

The Emperor fastened his eyes on the pistol and couldn't get enough of looking at it.

He oohed and aahed something awful.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" he says. "What do you know about that! How is it possible to do such fine work!" And he turned to Platov and said to him in Russian, "Now if only I had just one craftsman like that in Russia I would be a very happy man. I'd be so proud I would make a nobleman of him on the spot."

At these words Platov stuck his right hand into his big wide trousers and pulled out a gunsmith's screwdriver. The Englishmen said, "This won't come open," but Platov, paying no attention to them, started tinkering with the gunlock. He turned it once, he turned it twice—and the gun opened up. Platov showed the Emperor the trigger, and right there in the crook was a Russian inscription: "Ivan Moskvin in Tula Town."[4]

The Englishmen were amazed and nudged each other. "Uh-oh!" they said. "We slipped up that time."

But the Emperor said sadly to Platov, "Why did you have to embarrass them so much? Let's go."

They got into their two-sitter again and started off, and the Emperor went to a ball that evening, but Platov downed a still bigger glass of grape vodka and slept the sound sleep of the Cossacks.

He had been glad to put the Englishmen to rout and attract contention to the Tula gunsmith, but he had been put out as well. Why did the Emperor have to feel sorry for the Englishmen in a case like this?

"Why did the Emperor feel bad about it?" thought Platov. "I can't figure it out at all." And in this consideration he got up twice, crossed himself, and drank vodka until at last he forced himself into a sound sleep.

At that same time the Englishmen were not asleep either, because their heads were spinning, too. While the Emperor was having a good time at the ball, they cooked up such a new marvel for him that they completely knocked the imagination out of Platov.

3

The next day, when Platov reported to the Emperor to say good morning, he told Platov, "Have the two-sitter carriage hitched up, and let's go to look at some more museums."

Platov even made bold to ask the Emperor whether they hadn't looked at enough outlandish products, and wouldn't it be better to get ready to go back to Russia, but the Emperor said, "No, I wish to see still other novelties here; they have boasted to me about how they make sugar of the very highest quality."

They started off.

The Englishmen showed everything to the Emperor—just how many different highest qualities they had—and Platov looked and looked, and then suddenly he said, "But won't you show us your factories where you make Molvo sugar?"

The Englishmen didn't know what "Molvo" was.[5] They whispered back and forth to each other, winked back and forth to each other, and repeated to each other, "Molvo, Molvo," but they couldn't understand what kind of sugar that was which we made in our country, and they had to admit that they had all kinds of sugar—but no "Molvo."

Platov said, "Well, then, you haven't got anything to brag about. Come to our country and we'll fill you full of tea with genuwine Molvo sugar from Bobrinsky's factory."[6]

But the Emperor tugged him by the sleeve and said quietly, "Now, please don't go and spoil my politics."

Then the Englishmen invited the Emperor to their very latest museum, where they had brought together mineral stones and nymphusorias from all over the world, beginning with the most enormous Egyptian hobble lists and coming down to the hidebound flea, which you can't see with your eyes but can only feel when he bites you between your hide and your body.

The Emperor set out.

They looked at the hobble lists and all kinds of stuffed animals, and then came out and Platov thought to himself, "There now, thank the Lord, everything is turning out all right: the Emperor hasn't marveled at anything."

But as soon as they got to the very last room, there were workmen standing around in everyday jackets

and aprons holding a tray that had nothing on it.

Then the Emperor really did marvel because they offered him an empty tray.

"What does this mean?" he asked, and the English craftsmen replied, "This is our humble offering to Your Highness."

"But what *is* it?"

"Well," they said, "does Your Highness kindly see this little speck?"

The Emperor took a look and saw that there really was the tiniest little speck lying on the tray.

The workmen said, "Be so kind as to spit on your finger and pick it up and put it on your hand."

"What good is that speck to me?"

"That," they answered, "is not a speck but a nymphusoria."

"Is it alive?"

"No, sir," they answered, "it's not alive. We made it in the shape of a flea out of pure English steel, and inside it is a motor and a spring. Be so kind as to wind it up with the key: then it will do a little *dansez*."

The Emperor got curious and asked, "But where is the key?"

The Englishmen replied, "Here is the key, right in front of your eyes."

"Then why can't I see it?" asked the Emperor.

"Because," they said, "you have to blow it up in a nitroscope."

A nitroscope was brought in, and the Emperor saw that a little key really was lying on the tray beside the flea.

"Be so kind as to take it in your hand," they said. "There's a hole in its belly for the key, and the key will take seven turns. Then it will start its *dansez*."

The Emperor could barely pick up the key and barely hold it in his fingers. He took hold of the flea with his other hand and hadn't hardly stuck the key in before he felt the whiskers move, and then the legs started working, and at last it suddenly jumped up and in one bound did a straight *dansez* and two fairiations to one side and then to the other, and danced like that through a whole cod drill in three fairiations.

The Emperor gave orders on the spot to give a million to the Englishmen in any kind of money they wanted—either in silver five-kopeck coins, if they wished, or else in small bills.

The Englishmen asked for it in silver, because they couldn't make heads or tails out of paper money, and then right off they pulled another one of their shifty tricks: they handed over the flea as a gift, but they hadn't brought any case for it. Without a case you couldn't keep either the flea or the key, because they would get lost and thrown out with the trash. But they had made a case out of a diamond in the shape of a nut, with a hole dug out of the middle for the flea. They didn't make a gift of this, because they said the case was government property, and they are very strict over there about government property, even for the Emperor—you can't give it away.

Platov was about to get hot under the collar, and he said, "What's the idea of all this swindle! They gave us a gift and they got a million for it, and still that isn't enough! The case," he says, "always goes with such things as these."

But the Emperor said, "Leave off, please, this isn't your affair—don't go and spoil my politics. They have their own customs." And he asked, "How much does that nut cost that the flea fits into?"

The Englishmen reckoned that would be five thousand more.

Emperor Alexander said, "Pay them," and put the flea in that nut himself, and the key along with it, and so as not to lose the nut he put it into his gold snuffbox, and he ordered the snuffbox put into his little traveling casket, which was all covered with the mother-of-pearl and fish bones. The Emperor dismissed the English workmen with honor and said to them, "You are the finest workmen in the whole world, and my men can't do anything compared to you."

They were very pleased with this, and Platov could say nothing against the words of his Emperor. Only he took the nitroscope and slipped it in his pocket without saying anything, because "it goes with it," he says, "and you've taken a lot of money from us already."

The Emperor knew nothing about that till he got to Russia. They left right away, because military affairs had filled the Emperor with melancholy and he wanted to go to spiritual confession before Father Fedot in Taganrog.[7] On the way he and Platov had a mighty unpleasant conversation, because they had entirely different ideas in their heads: the Emperor thought nobody could come up to the Englishmen in art, and Platov begged to report that our people could make anything once they got a good look at it, only they didn't have any useful training. And he pointed out to the Emperor that the English workmen have completely different rules of life, science, and production for everything, and every man among them has all the absolute circumstances before him, and for that reason he has a completely different meaning.

The Emperor would not listen very long to that, and when Platov saw this he didn't insist. So they rode along in silence, only Platov would get out at every station and in his aggravation he would drink a big glass of vodka, eat a little salt mutton, light up his enormous pipe, which was big enough to hold a whole pound of Zhukov tobacco,[8] and then take his seat beside the Tsar in the carriage and sit without saying a word. The Emperor would look off in one direction, and Platov would stick his chibouk[9] out the other window and smoke into the wind. This was how they rode all the way to Petersburg, and when the Emperor went on to see Father Fedot he didn't take Platov at all.

"You," he said, "are intemperate in spiritual conversation, and you smoke so much that my head is full of soot from your pipe."

Platov felt insulted and he lay down at home on his bed of ire, and just kept on lying there, smoking his Zhukov tobacco without intercession.

4

The marvelous flea of blue English steel remained in Alexander the First's little fish-bone casket until he died in Taganrog, after turning it over to Father Fedot to pass on to the Empress when she calmed down. Empress Elizabeth Alexeyevna looked at the flea's fairiations and smiled, but she didn't take an interest in it.

"My affairs now," she said, "are widow's affairs, and no amusements can win my attention," and when she got back to Petersburg she handed over this wonder with all her other valuables as an inheritance for the new emperor.

In the beginning Tsar Nicholas the First also paid no attention to the flea, because there was trouble at the time he got up on the throne, but after that, one day he started looking through the little casket that had come down to him from his brother, and he took out the snuffbox, and out of the snuffbox he took the diamond nut, and in it he found the steel flea, which had not been wound up in a long time and for that reason was not moving, but lay there quietly like it was numb.

The Emperor looked at it in amazement.

"What can this trifle be, and to what purpose did my brother preserve it in this way?"

The courtiers wanted to throw it out, but the Emperor said, "No, this must mean something."

They called a druggist from the pharmacy effacing the Anichkin Bridge, who weighed poisons in the very finest scales. They showed it to him, and he took the flea and put it on his tongue and said, "I feel something cold, like strong metal." And then he mashed it a little with his teeth and announced, "Say what you please, but this is not a genuine flea but a nymphusoria, and it is made of metal, and the work is not ours—not Russian."

The Emperor ordered that inquiries should be made at once about where it had come from and what it signified.

They plunged into an examination of the records and the lists, but nothing was written in the records. They began asking this one and that, but nobody knew anything. By good luck, though, Platov the Don Cossack was still alive and even still lying on his bed of ire and smoking his pipe. As soon as he heard about all that disturbance at the court, he rose up from his bed, threw down his pipe, and reported to the Emperor with all his decorations. The Emperor said, "What need have you of me, courageous old man?"

And Platov answered, "I need nothing for myself, Your Majesty, since I eat and drink all I want and I'm satisfied with everything. But," he says, "I have come to report about that nymphusoria they found. This is the way it was," he says, "this is how it happened right before my eyes in England, and right here beside it is the key, and I've got their own nitroscope, that you can use to blow it up and look at it, and with this key you can wind up the nymphusoria through its belly, and it will hop around in any space you want and do fairiations to each side."

They wound it up, it began to jump, and Platov said, "You're right, Your Majesty," he says, "that the work is mighty fine and interesting, only it's not right for us to marvel at it with nothing but the rapture of our feelings. It ought to be submitted for Russian inspection at Tula or Sesterbek" (at that time Sestroretsk was still called Sesterbek) "to see whether our craftsmen can't outdo it, so that the Englishmen won't keep lording it over us Russians."

Emperor Nicholas had great confidence in his Russian men and didn't like to yield to any foreigner, and so he answered Platov, "You speak well, courageous old man, and I charge you with the task of proving this matter. With all my cares I do not need this little box. You take it with you, and lie no more on your bed of ire, but go to the silent Don, and strike up intimidating conversations there with my Don people about their life and devotion and what is pleasing to them. And when you go through Tula, show

this nymphusoria to my Tula craftsmen, that they may ponder over it. Tell them from me that my brother marveled at this thing, and he praised above all others the foreigners who made this nymphusoria, but I place my hope in my own people, that they are surpassed by no one. They will heed my word and will do something."

5

Platov took the steel flea, and when he went through Tula toward the Don, he showed it to the Tula gunsmiths and passed the Emperor's words on to them and then asked, "Now what can we do about it, Orthodox brethren?"

The gunsmiths replied, "Worthy old man, we feel the gracious word of the Emperor, and we never can forget it, because he puts his hope in his own people, but what we can do about it in this here case we can't say in just one minute, because the English nation ain't stupid either; they're even sort of cunning, and their art is full of horse sense. We mustn't go out after them till we've pondered about it and got God's blessing. Now, if you have confidence in us like the Emperor, then journey hence to your home upon the silent Don, and leave us this here little flea just like it is, in its case and in the golden snuffbox of the Tsar. Make yourself merry along the Don and heal the wounds you have suffered for our fatherland, and when you return through Tula, tarry and send for us: by that time, God willing, it may be that we'll have something thunk up."

Platov was not completely satisfied because the Tula workmen demanded so much time and didn't talk very clearly about just what they hoped to make. He asked them this way and that, and using his Don Cossack cunning he talked with them in every sort of way, but the Tula men were no less cunning than he was, because they already had thought up such a plan that they couldn't really hope even Platov would believe them, and they wanted to carry out their bold idea right away and then hand it over.

They said, "Even we ourselves don't know yet what we'll do, but we'll only rest our faith in God and trust that the Tsar's word won't be put to shame through our doings."

Platov kept twisting and turning this way and that, and so did the men from Tula.

Platov wriggled and wriggled till he saw that he couldn't out-wriggle a Tula man, and then he handed over the snuffbox with the nymphusoria and said, "Well, there's nothing to do. Let it be your way," he says. "I know you—what kind you are. Still, there's nothing to do—I believe you. Only take care and don't try to swap diamonds on me, and don't spoil the fine English workmanship, and don't fool around very long, because I travel fast. Two weeks won't go by before I return again from the silent Don to Petersburg. At that time see to it that I have something to show the Emperor."

The gunsmiths reassured him completely. "We ain't going to harm the fine workmanship," they said, "and we won't change diamonds on you, and two weeks are enough time for us, and by the time you come back you will have *something* worthy to be shown to His Imperial Splendor."

But exactly *what* it was, they just wouldn't say.

6

Platov departed from Tula; and three of the gunsmiths, the most skillful of them all—one of them a cross-eyed left-handed man with a birthmark on his cheek and bald spots on his temples where the hair had been pulled out when he was an apprentice—these three bade farewell to their fellow workmen and their families, and without saying anything to anybody they took their bags, put what food they needed into them, and disappeared from town.

The only thing anybody noticed was that they didn't go out through the Moscow gate but through the one on the other side, in the direction of Kiev, and people thought they had gone to Kiev to bow down before the saints resting there in peace or to take counsel with some of the holy men still alive there, who were always available in abundance in Kiev.

But this was only close to the truth and not the truth itself. Neither time nor distance allowed the Tula craftsmen in three weeks to walk to Kiev and then on top of that to make something that would put the English nation to shame. They might have done better to go and pray in Moscow, which was only "twice fifty miles away," and a good many holy saints rest in peace there too. In the other direction too it was "twice fifty miles" to Oriol and then another good three hundred from Oriol to Kiev. You won't get over that much ground in a hurry, and even when you've done it you won't get rested in a hurry: for a long

time your feet will feel as numb as glass and your hands will tremble.

Some people even thought the craftsmen had bragged a little too much to Platov and then after they thought it over had gotten scared and run away for good, taking along the Tsar's gold snuffbox, and the diamond, and the English steel flea in its case that had brought them all the trouble.

However, this supposition too was completely unfounded, and was unworthy of the clever men on whom the hope of the nation now rested.

7

The inhabitants of Tula, who are intelligent people and knowledgeable about metalwork, are also well known as the finest experts in religion. Their fame in this connection has spread all over their native land and has even reached Mount Athos: they are not only masters at singing their fancy trills, they also know how to paint the picture *Evening Bells*, and if any of them dedicate themselves to greater service and enter monastic life, they become famous as the best managers of monastery household affairs, and they make the most capable collectors of alms. On holy Mount Athos everybody knows that the Tula inhabitants are a most remunerative people, and if it weren't for them, most likely the dark corners of Russia would not see very many holy relics from the distant East, and Mount Athos would be deprived of many useful contributions from Russian generosity and piety. Today the "Tula men of Mount Athos" carry holy relics all over our native land and skillfully collect contributions even where there is nothing to collect. The Tula man is full of churchly piety and is highly practical in this matter, and so the three master craftsmen who took it on themselves to uphold Platov, and with him all Russia, made no mistake when they headed south instead of toward Moscow. They didn't go to Kiev at all but to Mtsensk, to the district town of Oriol Province in which there stands the ancient "stone-graven" icon of Saint Nicholas, which was brought here in the most ancient times along the Zusha River on a large cross, likewise made of stone. This icon is "awesome and most terrible" in appearance. The sainted archbishop of Myra in Lycia is represented on it full-length, clothed all over in silver-gilt clothing, swarthy of face and holding a temple in one hand and the sword of "Military Conquest" in the other. It was just this "Conquest" that held the meaning of the whole thing: Saint Nicholas in general, and "Nicholas of Mtsensk" in particular, was the patron saint of commerce and warfare, and so the Tula gunsmiths went to make their bows to him. They held their prayer service right in front of the icon, and then in front of the stone cross, and finally, returning home by night and saying nothing to anybody, they set about their work in awful secrecy. All three of them got together in Lefty's house; they locked the doors, boarded up the windows, lighted a lamp before the icon of Saint Nicholas, and started to work.

One day, two days, three days they sat without going out anywhere, all of them tapping away with their hammers. They were making something, but what it was they were making nobody knew.

Everyone was curious, but nobody could find out a thing because the workmen said nothing and never stuck their noses outside. All sorts of people would go up to the little house and knock on the door with all sorts of excuses, to ask for fire or borrow some salt, but the three experts would not open up for any kind of request. Even how they got food nobody knew. People tried to scare them, and pretended that the house next door was on fire to see whether they wouldn't run out in fright and give away the secret of what they were making, but nothing could take in those shrewd workmen. Lefty stuck his head out only once and shouted, "Go ahead and burn up; we ain't got time," and then he drew in his plucked head, banged the shutters tight, and got to work again. Through the tiny cracks people could only see the glitter of a light and hear the ringing blows of tiny hammers tapping on anvils.

In a word, the whole thing was handled in such awful secrecy that there was no way to find out anything about it, and it lasted right up to the return of the Cossack Platov from the silent Don on his way to the Emperor, and during all that time the craftsmen saw nobody and said nothing.

8

Platov traveled in great haste and ceremony: he himself sat in the carriage, and on the coach boxes two Cossack scurriers holding whips sat on each side of the driver and poured it on him unmercifully so as to make him hurry. If either one of the Cossacks dozed off, Platov would give him a kick from inside the carriage, and they would tear along even more wildly. These measures worked so well that there was no holding back the horses at a single station anywhere; they would always gallop on a hundred paces past

the halting place. Then the Cossack would work on the driver once more in the opposite direction, and they would go back to the entrance.

That was the way they rolled into Tula: there too at first they flew a hundred paces beyond the Moscow gate, and then the Cossack worked on the driver with his whip in the opposite direction, and at the entrance they started hitching up fresh horses. Platov didn't get out of the carriage but only told his scurrier to go as fast as possible and get the craftsmen he had left the flea with.

One scurrier dashed off to get them to come as fast as possible and bring him the work that was to put the Englishmen to shame, and that scurrier had run only a short distance when Platov sent first one and then another after him so as to speed things up.

He sent off all his scurriers and then began dispatching ordinary people from the curious crowd, and in impatience he even stuck his own legs out of the carriage and was about to start running impatiently himself, and he gritted his teeth because they were all so slow in coming into sight.

In those days everything had to be done just right and very fast, so as not to lose a minute that might be useful to Russia.

9

At that very moment the Tula craftsmen who were making the marvelous thing had finished their work. The scurriers ran up to them puffing and blowing, and the ordinary people from the curious crowd—well, they didn't even get there at all, because their legs, being out of practice, scattered and fell along the way, and then in terror, for fear they might catch sight of Platov, they lit out for home and hid wherever they could.

As soon as the scurriers ran up, they gave a shout, and when they saw that nobody opened up, they jerked at the bolts on the shutters, but the bolts were so strong they wouldn't give at all; they pulled at the doors, but the doors were fastened from the inside with heavy oak bars. Then the scurriers picked up a beam from the street and stuck it under the eave of the roof the way firemen do, and in one blow they prized the whole roof off the hut. But as soon as they got the roof off, they themselves keeled over, because the workmen with their unceaseless labor in their crowded little shanty had expired so much that a man who wasn't used to it, coming right in when the wind was dead, instinkly choked.

The messengers cried out, "What are you doing, you so-and-so's, you swine? What do you mean by knocking us over with that expiration? Or ain't you got any fear of God left in you?"

And they answered, "Just a minute; we're driving in the last nail, and as soon as we hammer it down we'll bring out our work."

The messengers said, "He'll eat us alive before then and won't even leave our souls for the funeral."

But the craftsmen answered, "He won't have time to gobble you up, because we drove the last nail in while you were standing there talking. Run and tell him we're bringing it right now."

The scurriers dashed off, but their hearts weren't in it, because they thought the craftsmen might fool them, and for that reason they ran and ran but kept looking back. But the craftsmen were coming along behind them, and they had hurried so fast they hadn't even got dressed quite the way they ought for a meeting with an important person, and while they ran they were still fastening the hooks of their caftans. Two of them had nothing in their hands, but the third one, Lefty, had the Tsar's jewel casket wrapped in a green cloth cover with the English steel flea inside.

10

The scurriers ran up to Platov and said, "Here they are, in person!"

Platov barked at the craftsmen, "Is it ready?"

"It's all ready," they answered.

"Give it here."

They handed it over.

The carriage was already hitched up, and the driver and postilion were in their places. The Cossacks at once took their seats beside the driver and raised their whips over his head and held them brandished there.

Platov snatched off the green cover, opened the little casket, took the gold snuffbox out of its padding and the diamond nut out of the snuffbox. He saw the English flea lying there just the way it had before,

and apart from it, nothing else was there.

Platov said, “What’s the meaning of this? Where is your work that you wanted to console the Emperor with?”

The gunsmiths answered, “Our work is right there.”

Platov asked, “What kind of work?”

The gunsmiths answered, “What’s the use of explaining? Everything is right there in front of your eyes. Just take a look at it.”

Platov squared his shoulders and shouted, “Where’s the key to the flea?”

“Why, it’s right here,” they answered. “Where the flea is, there the key is—in the same nut.”

Platov tried to take hold of the key, but his fingers were too stubby. He grabbed and grabbed but couldn’t catch either the flea or the key to its bellyworks, and suddenly he burst out and started swearing with colorful Cossack words.

He shouted, “You scoundrels, you’ve done nothing at all, and on top of it you’ve probably ruined the whole thing! I’ll take off your heads!”

But the Tula men answered him, “There ain’t no use insulting us. From you, as the Emperor’s messenger, we’ve got to put up with all insults, but just because you wouldn’t trust us and thought we were the kind that would even cheat the Emperor hisself, we ain’t going to tell you the secret of our work now; just be so kind as to take it to the Emperor, and he’ll see what sort of men he’s got in us, and whether we’ve done anything to make him ashamed of us.”

Platov shouted, “You’re lying, you scoundrels, and I won’t let you get away from me like that. One of you will go with me to Petersburg, and there I’ll get out of him what kind of scullduggery you’ve been up to.”

And with this he reached out, grabbed the cross-eyed Lefty by the collar with his stubby fingers, so that all the hooks flew off his kazakin shirt, and pitched him into the carriage at his feet.

“Lie there like a puddle,” he said, “till we get to Petersburg. You’ll answer to me for all of them. And you,” he said to the scurriers, “get a move on! Look sharp now, and see to it that I’m in Petersburg at the Emperor’s the day after tomorrow!”

The craftsmen stuck their necks out for their comrade and asked how he could be taken away from them like that without his grasp port. Then he would have no way to get back! But instead of answering them Platov just showed them his fist—a frightful one, all knotty and hacked apart and somehow grown back together again—and waving it in front of them he said, “There’s a grasp port for you!”

And he said to his Cossacks, “Let’s go, boys!”

His Cossacks, drivers, and steeds all started working at once and they whisked Lefty away without his grasp port, and two days later, just as Platov had ordered, they rolled up to the Emperor’s palace, arriving at such a properly furious gallop that they drove right past the columns.

Platov stood up, hooked on his decorations, and went in to the Emperor, telling his Cossack scurriers to keep watch at the entrance over cross-eyed Lefty.

11

Platov was afraid to report to the Emperor in person, because it was awful how noticeable and memorable Tsar Nicholas was—he never forgot anything. Platov knew he was bound to ask him about the flea. And even though he was afraid of no enemy on earth, right here he got cold feet: he carried the little casket into the palace and very quietly laid it down in the hall behind the stove. With the box hidden he presented himself to the Emperor in his office and quickly began reporting on the intimidating conversations he’d had with the Cossacks on the silent Don. He figured he would try to keep the Emperor busy with this. Then, if the Emperor remembered and started talking about the flea, he would have to hand it over and answer, but if the Emperor didn’t say anything about it, he could just keep quiet. He would tell the Emperor’s servant to hide the little casket and lock up Lefty in a fortress cell so as to keep him handy in case he might be needed.

But Emperor Nicholas forgot about nothing, and Platov had barely finished about the intimidating conversations when he asked at once, “And how about it—how did my Tula craftsmen justify themselves against the English nymphusoria?”

Platov answered the way the matter looked to him.

“Your Majesty,” he says, “the nymphusoria is still lying in that same space, and I have brought it back, but the Tula craftsmen couldn’t make anything more marvelous.”

The Emperor replied, “You are a courageous old man, but what you report to me cannot be so.”

Platov tried to convince him and told him how the whole thing had happened, and when he got to the part where the Tula workmen asked him to show the flea to the Emperor, Tsar Nicholas slapped him on the back and said, “Give it here. I know my men won’t let me down. Something has been done here that is past all understanding.”

12

They brought the little casket out from behind the stove, they took the cloth cover off, they opened the gold snuffbox and the diamond nut—and there the flea was, lying just the way it had before.

The Emperor took a look and said, “What a misfortune!” But his faith in his Russian craftsmen didn’t slacken, and he sent for his favorite daughter, Alexandra, and commanded her, “You have slender fingers: hasten, take that little key and wind up the bellyworks of that nymphusoria.”

The princess began to wind it up, and the flea at once started wiggling its whiskers, but it didn’t move its feet. Alexandra pulled on the whole works, but still the nymphusoria wouldn’t do a single *dansez* or fairiation, the way it used to.

Platov turned green all over and shouted, “Oh, those rascally dogs! Now I understand why they wouldn’t tell me anything. It’s lucky I brought one of their blockheads along with me.”

With these words he ran out to the entrance, grabbed Lefty by the hair, and began to swing him back and forth so hard that tufts of it started flying. When Platov had stopped beating him, Lefty straightened himself out and said, “That’s the way all my hair got pulled out while I was an apprentice. I don’t know what need there is now to go through all that again.”

“That’s because I’d counted on you and vouched for you,” said Platov, “and then you went and spoiled that rarity.”

Lefty answered, “We’re mighty glad you vouched for us, and as for spoiling—we didn’t spoil nothing. Just blow it up in your strongest nitroscope and take a look.”

Platov ran back to tell them about the nitroscope, but to Lefty he only warned, “I’ll give you this-that-and-the-other even yet.”

He ordered the scurriers to twist Lefty’s arms even harder behind his back, and he himself went up the steps, puffing and blowing and repeating the prayer “Blessed Tsar’s Most Blessed Mother, immaculate and pure” and so on, as needed. And the courtiers who were standing on the steps all turned their backs on him. They thought, “Platov is done for now, and he’ll soon be chased out of the palace,” because they couldn’t stand him on account of his bravery.

13

As soon as Platov reported Lefty’s words to the Emperor, he said, full of joy, “I know my Russian men will not let me down.” And he ordered the nitroscope to be brought forward on a pillow.

The nitroscope was brought forward that very minute, and the Emperor took the flea and laid it under the glass, first on its belly, then on its side, and then on its back. In a word, it was turned in every direction, but nothing could be seen. Still the Emperor didn’t lose faith. He only said, “Bring hither at once that gunsmith who is waiting below.”

Platov reported, “They’d have to dress him up. He’s still got the clothes on he was caught in, and now he’s in bad shape.”

But the Emperor replied, “Never mind; bring him in just as he is.”

Platov said, “Come in here, now, you so-and-so, and answer to the Emperor before his eyes.”

Lefty replied, “Why, sure, I’ll go like this and I’ll answer.”

He went like he was: in ragged boots, with one trouser leg tucked in and the other dangling, with an old jacket that wouldn’t fasten because the hooks were lost, and with the collar that was torn; but it didn’t matter—he wasn’t embarrassed.

“What of it?” he thought. “If the Emperor wants to see me, I’ve got to go, and if I ain’t got a grasp port, it ain’t my fault, and I’ll tell him how it happened.”

As soon as Lefty came in and bowed, the Emperor said to him, “What does this mean, my good man? We have looked this way and that and have blown it up in the nitroscope and we still can’t find anything remarkable.”

Lefty answered, “Did Your Majesty be so kind as to look at it the right way?”

The nobles motioned to him to tell him that was not the way to talk, but he didn't understand how to talk courtier language—with flattery or cunning—and he kept on talking simply.

The Emperor said to them, "Stop making things complicated for him; let him answer as he knows how."

And then he explained to Lefty, "This is the way we laid it," he says. And he put the flea under the nitroscope. "Look at it yourself," he says. "You can't see a thing."

Lefty answered, "You can't see nothing that way, Your Majesty, because our work is a lot too secret for that size."

The Emperor asked, "Then how *do* we manage it?"

"You have to put just one of its feet in detail under the whole nitroscope, and look one at a time at each foot it walks on."

"Goodness gracious," said the Emperor. "That's powerfully small."

"But what else can you do," answered Lefty, "if that's the only way you can get a look at our work? Then you can see the whole amazement."

They laid it down the way Lefty said and as soon as the Emperor looked in the upper glass, he beamed all over. He grabbed Lefty just the way he was—dirty, dusty, unwashed—and put his arms around him and kissed him on the cheek, and then he turned to all the courtiers and said, "You see, I knew better than everybody that my Russians would not let me down. Just look: why, the rascals have taken the English flea and nailed flea-shoes on its feet!"

14

They all came up to look: all the flea's feet really were shod with genuine flea-shoes, and Lefty reported that this was not the only marvel.

"If you had a better nitroscope," he said, "one that would blow it up five million times, then you could be so kind as to see that a craftsman's name was put on each shoe, so as to show which Russian gunsmith made that shoe."

"Is your name there too?" asked the Emperor.

"No, sir," answered Lefty. "Mine is the only one that ain't."

"Why isn't it?"

"Because I did smaller work than these flea-shoes," he said. "I made the nails the shoes were fastened on with, and they are too small for any nitroscope to blow them up."

The Emperor asked, "But where is your nitroscope, which you used to produce this marvel?"

Lefty answered, "We are poor people—too poor to own a nitroscope, so we just sharpened our eyes."

Seeing that Lefty's business had turned out well, the other courtiers began to kiss him, and Platov gave him a hundred rubles and said, "Forgive me, brother, for dragging you around by the hair."

Lefty answered, "God will forgive you—it ain't the first time that kind of snow has fallen on my head."

He would say no more—and he didn't even have time to say more, because the Emperor ordered the iron-shod nymphusoria to be packed up and sent back at once to England, as a sort of gift, to make them understand that it wasn't any marvel to us. And the Emperor ordered the flea to be carried by a special courier who was learned in all languages, and ordered the left-handed smith to go with him so that he himself could show their work to the Englishmen and show them what kind of craftsmen we have in Tula.

Platov made the sign of the cross over him.

"Blessings be upon you," he said. "I'll send you some of my own grape vodka for the journey. Don't drink too little and don't drink too much—drink middlesome."

And so he did—he sent it.

Count Nestlebroad[10] gave orders to wash Lefty in the Tula Public Baths, cut his hair in a barbershop, and deck him out in the full-dress coat of a singer in the royal choir, so that he would look like he had some kind of paid government rank.

As soon as they had worked him over this way, they filled him with tea and Platov's grape vodka, drew up his belt as tight as possible so that his guts wouldn't shake, and sent him off to London. That is when foreign sights started happening to Lefty.

15

The courier traveled powerfully fast with Lefty, so that they didn't stop to rest anywhere between Petersburg and London, but only drew their belts another notch tighter at every station, so that their guts wouldn't get mixed up with their lungs; but since Lefty on Platov's orders was allotted as much government vodka as he wanted after he had been presented to the Emperor, he kept up his strength on this alone, without eating anything, and he sang Russian songs all the way through Europe—only adding a refrain of foreign words:

Aye loolee
Say tray Joe Lee

As soon as the courier got him to London, he reported to the proper authorities and handed over the box, and then put Lefty down in a hotel room; but there he soon began to get restless, and besides, he was hungry. He knocked on the door and pointed to his mouth when the servant came, and the servant took him right off to the feeding room.

Here Lefty sat down at a table and waited. He didn't know how to ask for anything in English. But then he figured it out: again he just tapped on the table with his finger and pointed to his mouth; the Englishmen guessed what he meant and served him, only they didn't always bring what he wanted. But he wouldn't take anything that didn't suit him. They brought him their kind of hot glum pudding in flames. He said, "I don't see how anybody can eat that," and he wouldn't take a bite. They exchanged it for him and brought him something else to eat. He wouldn't drink their vodka, either, because it was green—like they had flavored it with sulfuric acid. He picked out the plainest stuff they had, and waited in the cool with his canteen for the courier.

And the people the courier had handed the nymphusoria over to looked at it that very minute through their strongest nitroscope and sent a description right off to a calumnist on the *Daily Telegraft*, so that he could tell everybody about it the very next day.

"And as for that craftsman," they said, "we want to see him at once." The courier took them to the hotel room and from there to the feeding room, where our Lefty had begun to glow very decently, and said, "There he is."

The Englishmen slapped Lefty on the back right away and took him by the hands, just like their own equal. "Comrade," they said, "comrade, you're a good craftsman. We'll talk to you afterward when there is time, but now we want to drink to your prosperity."

They ordered a lot of wine and gave Lefty the first glass, but out of politeness he wouldn't be the first to drink. He thought, "Maybe you're so aggravated you want to poison me."

"No," he said, "that's not the way to do it. Even with a Polish thirst, you have to let the host drink first. You yourselves drink on ahead."

The Englishmen tasted all their wines in front of him and then started filling his glass. He stood up, crossed himself with his left hand, and drank to the health of them all.

They noticed that he had crossed himself with his left hand, and they asked the courier, "What is he—a Lutheranian or a Protesterian?"

The courier answered, "He's not either a Lutheranian or a Protesterian; he belongs to the Russian faith."

"But why does he cross himself with his left hand?"

The courier replied, "He's a left-handed man, and he does everything with his left hand."

The Englishmen marveled even more and started pumping both Lefty and the courier full of wine, and kept on this way for three whole days, and then they said, "Now that's enough." They symphonied some water out of a bottle with impressed air, and when they were refreshed all over they started asking Lefty all about where had he studied, and what had he studied, and how far had he gone in arithmetic.

Lefty answered, "Our learning is simple—according to the Psalter and the *Dream Book*. We don't know no arithmetic at all."

The Englishmen looked at each other and said, "That's amazing."

And Lefty answered, "It's that way all over in our country."

"But what sort of book is that in Russia," they asked, "that dream book?"

"That book," he said, "refers to if King David didn't reveal some fortune-telling clearly in the Psalter, then you can get some extra fortunes out of the *Dream Book*."

They said, "That's too bad. It would be better if you at least knew the four rules of addition; that would be a lot more utilifying to you than your whole *Dream Book*. Then you would be able to understand that every machine has its balance of forces. As it is, even though you are mighty skillful with your hands, you didn't realize that such a little machine as the one in the nymphusoria was calculated for the most accurate exactness, and it can't carry the flea-shoes. That's why the nymphusoria

won't jump or dance any *dansez*."

Lefty agreed. "About that there ain't no argument," he said. "We didn't get very far in book learning, but only faithfully serve our fatherland."

And the Englishmen said to him, "Stay here with us; we'll give you a big education and you'll turn out to be a superbluous craftsman."

But Lefty wouldn't agree. "I've got my parents at home," he said.

The Englishmen offered to send his parents money, but Lefty wouldn't take it.

"We are devoted to our country," he said, "and my daddy's an old man and my mother's an old woman, and they're used to going to church in their own parish, and it would be mighty lonely here for me all by myself, because I'm still a bachelor by calling."

"You'll get used to it," they said. "You'll accept our laws, and we'll get you married."

"That can never be," answered Lefty.

"Why not?"

"Because," he answered, "our Russian faith is the rightest one, and the way our forefathers believed is just the way their dissentants have to believe."

"You don't know our faith," said the Englishmen. "We've got the same Christian law and hold to the same Gospel."

"It's true," said Lefty, "that everybody's got the same Gospel, but our books are thicker than yours, and our faith is fuller."

"How can you judge that way?"

"We've got all the evident proofs of it," he answered.

"What kind?"

"Why, we've got God-wondering icons and prism-working relics, and you ain't got nothing—except for Sunday, you ain't even got any special holidays. And the second reason is that even if I was married in the law to an English girl it would be confusing to live with her."

"How's that?" they asked. "Don't turn up your nose at our girls—they too dress neatly and they're good housekeepers."

But Lefty said, "I don't know them."

The Englishmen replied, "That's no problem—you'll get to know them. We'll fix up a roundy-view for you."

Lefty started blushing. "What's the use of stringing the girls along for no reason?" he said, and he wouldn't budge. "That's something for fine gentlemen. It wouldn't suit us. And if they found out about it at home, in Tula, they'd make fun of me something awful."

The Englishmen got curious. "Then suppose we did it without a roundy-view," they said. "How do you manage in your country so as to make a favorable choice?"

Lefty explained our way to them. "In our country," he said, "when a man wants to reveal a circumstantial intention in regard to a girl, he sends over a conversational woman, and when she has made a preposition, they politely go to the house together and look the girl over without concealment, and in front of all the relationships."

They understood, but they answered that they had no conversational women and followed no such custom, and Lefty said, "That's all the better, because if you go in for that kind of thing you have to do it with a circumstantial intention, and since I don't feel none toward a foreign nation, what's the use of stringing the girls along?"

The Englishmen were pleased with him for these opinions too, and so they started off again in their friendly way, slapping him on the back and the knees, and they asked, "Just out of curiosity," they said, "we'd like to know what signs of defects you've noticed in our girls, and why you keep away from them?"

At this Lefty answered them frankly. "I don't mean to run them down; I just don't like the way their dresses sort of swish back and forth, so that you can't make out just what they've got on and what it's for. There'll be one thing here, and below something else will be pinned on, and on their arms they'll have some kind of socks. In them velveteen coats of theirs they look just like capuchin monkeys."

The Englishmen laughed and said, "Why does that get in your way?"

"It don't get in my way," answered Lefty, "only I'm scared I'd be ashamed to look and wait until she got untangled from all that stuff."

"But do you really think your fashions are better?" they asked.

"Our fashions in Tula," he replied, "are simple: every girl is dressed in her own lace. Our lace is worn even by fine ladies."

Then they showed him off to their own ladies, and there they served him tea and asked him, "What are

you frowning for?”

He answered that “we ain’t used to drinking it so sweet.”

Then they served it to him in the Russian way, with a lump of sugar to suck.

This didn’t seem to be as good to them, but Lefty said, “To our taste, this way it’s tastier.”

The Englishmen couldn’t find any bait at all that could make him take to their life. They could only talk him into staying with them for a short while as their guest, and said they would take him to all sorts of factories and show him all their arts.

And after that, they said, they would put him on their own ship and “deliver him safe and sound in Petersburg.”

He agreed to that.

16

The Englishmen took charge of Lefty and sent the Russian courier back to Russia. Even though the courier had government rank and was learned in various languages, they weren’t interested in him, but they *were* interested in Lefty, and they set out to take Lefty around and show him everything. He looked at all their production: he really liked their metallic mills and their soapy-rope factories, and the way they managed things—especially the way they took care of their workers. Every one of their workmen was always well fed, none was dressed in rags, each one had on a capable everyday jacket and wore thick hard-nail boots with iron caps, so that he wouldn’t stump his toes anywhere on anything. Along with his work, he got teaching instead of beatings, and he worked with comprehension. In front of each one, hung up right in full view, was a stultification table, and within arm’s reach was a racing slate. Whatever any craftsman did, he would look up at the tables, and then check it with comprehension, and then write one thing down on the slate, race another thing, and put it together accurately: whatever was written down in the figures really came out that way. And when a holiday came, they would all get together in couples; each one would take a walking stick in his hand, and they would go for a walk in a proper way, all proud and polite.

Lefty got a good look at all their life and all their work, but above all else he paid attention to something that surprised the Englishmen a lot. He wasn’t interested so much in how they made new rifles as in how they took care of the old ones. He would walk around everything and praise it and say, “We can do that too.”

But whenever he came to an old rifle, he would stick his finger in the barrel, rub it around inside, and sigh. “That is way yonder better than ours.”

The Englishmen couldn’t figure out what Lefty noticed. He asked them, “Might I know whether or not our generals have ever looked at this?”

They answered, “Those who have been here must have taken a look.”

“But when they were here,” he asked, “did they have gloves on or not?”

“Yours are full-dress generals,” they said. “Gloves come with them, so they must have had them on here.”

Lefty said nothing. But suddenly he began to feel an uneasy homesickness. He pined away and pined away and said to the Englishmen, “I thank you kindly for your entertainment, and I like everything in your country, and I’ve seen everything I needed to see—and now I’d like to go home in a hurry.”

They couldn’t hold him back any longer. There was no way to let him go by land, because he didn’t know all languages, and it was a bad time to go by sea, because it was the fall of the year and stormy, but he insisted: “Let me go.”

“We’ve looked at the whether-meter,” they said. “A storm is coming; you could drown; after all, this is not like your Gulf of Finland—this is the real Militerranean Sea.”

“It’s all the same where a man dies,” he answered. “It’s all God’s will alone, and I want to get back home in a hurry; because if I don’t, I might get a kind of craziness in the head.”

They couldn’t hold him back by force. They fed him till he creaked, they rewarded him with money, they gave him an alarmed gold watch as a souvenir, and for the cold weather at sea on the late fall voyage they gave him a woolen overcoat with a windy hurricane hat for his head. They dressed him warmly and took him down to the ship that was sailing for Russia. There they gave Lefty the very best cabin, like a real nobleman, but he felt ashamed and didn’t like to sit shut up with the other gentlemen, and he would go up on deck and sit down under the tar poling and ask, “Where is our Russia?”

The Englishman he asked would point or nod off in that direction, and then Lefty would turn his head that way and impatiently look for his native land.

When they sailed out of the bay into the Militerranean Sea, his longing for Russia became so strong that there was no way to calm him down. The rolling and pitching was awful, but Lefty still wouldn't go down to his cabin; he sat under the tar poling, pulled his hurricane hat down over his eyes, and kept looking toward his homeland.

Often the Englishmen would come up and invite him to a warm spot down below, and he even began to lie his way out so that they would stop bothering him. "No," he would answer. "I feel better out here; if I went inside with all this rolling and pitching the sea wretch would get me."

And so the whole time he would never go below until he had to for special reasons, and because of this, the thirst mate took a liking to him. This thirst mate, to the misfortune of our Lefty, knew how to talk Russian, and he couldn't get over marveling that a Russian landlubber could hold out like that through all the rough weather.

"Good lad, Russ!" he said. "Let's take a drink!" Lefty took a drink.

And the thirst mate said, "Another one!"

So Lefty took another one, and they drank themselves tight. The thirst mate asked him, "What kind of secret is it you're taking to Russia from our country?"

Lefty answered, "That's my business."

"Well, if that's the way it is," answered the thirst mate, "then let me make an English bet with you."

Lefty asked, "What kind?"

"That we'll never drink alone and will always drink the same—one just as much as the other—and whoever drinks the other one down will win."

Lefty thought, "Dark skies, bellies rise; the boredom's strong and the way is long. We still can't see the homeland beyond the waves—it will be merrier after all to make the bet."

"All right," he said. "It's a bet."

"Only let it be honest."

"As far as that goes," he said, "you ain't got no worry."

They agreed and shook hands on it.

17

Their bet began in the Militerranean Sea, and they drank all the way to the Riga Dunamunde,[11] but they ran neck and neck, and neither one fell behind the other, and they kept so strictly even with each other that when one of them looked down into the sea and saw a devil climbing up out of the water, the very same thing immediately appeared to the other one. Only the thirst mate saw a redheaded devil, and Lefty claimed it was dark, like a blackamoor.

Lefty said, "Cross yourself and turn away; that's a devil from the deep."

But the Englishman argued that it was only a "deep-sea driver." "If you want me to," he said, "I'll pitch you overboard. Don't afraid—he'll bring you right hack to me."

And Lefty answered, "If that's true, then pitch me over."

The thirst mate picked him up by the shoulders and carried him to the rail.

The sailors saw this and stopped them and reported it to the captain. He ordered them both to be locked up below and kept on rations of rum and wine and cold food, so that they could both eat and drink and stick to their bet, but he gave orders that they were not to get any hot glum pudding in flames, for fear the spirits in their innards might catch fire.

So they traveled locked up all the way to Petersburg, and neither one of them won the bet. There they were spread out in separate sleighs, and the Englishman was sent to the embassy on the English quay and Lefty to the police station.

From this point their destinies became very different.

18

When the Englishman was brought to the ambassador's house, they at once called in a doctor and a druggist for him. The doctor ordered him put into a warm bath on the spot, and the druggist right away rolled up a gutta-percha pill and personally stuck it in his mouth, and then both of them together took and laid him on a feather bed and covered him over with a fur coat and left him to sweat; and to keep anyone from disturbing him, the order was sent out through the whole embassy to let nobody sneeze.

The doctor and the druggist waited till the thirst mate went to sleep, and then they made another gutta-percha pill for him, laid it on a little table at the head of his bed, and went off.

But at the police station they threw Lefty on the floor and started questioning him: “Who was he, and where was he from, and did he have a grasp port or any other kind of document?”

But he was so weak from his illness and the drinking and the rolling and pitching that he didn’t answer a word but only groaned.

Then they searched him right away, relieved him of his colorful clothes and his alarmed watch and fleeced him of his money; and the police officer gave orders that the first passing sleigh driver should take him free to the hospital.

The policeman took Lefty out to put him into a sleigh, but for a long time he couldn’t catch a single one, because sleigh drivers avoid policemen. Lefty was lying all this time on the cold depravement. Then the policeman caught a sleigh driver; only, one without a warm fur lap robe, because in cases like that they hide the fur lap robe by sitting on it, in order to make policemen’s feet freeze faster. So they carried Lefty in an open sleigh, and whenever they transferred him from one sleigh to another they would keep dropping him, and when they picked him up they would pull his ears to make him come to. They got him to one hospital, but there they wouldn’t accept him without a grasp port; they took him to another, and they wouldn’t accept him there either; and then to a third, and a fourth. All night long they kept dragging him through all the little winding alleys and transferring him over and over, until he was half dead. Then one doctor’s assistant told the policeman to take him to the Obukhvin Public Hospital, where everybody of unknown social class was taken in to die.

There they gave orders to write out a receipt and deposit Lefty on the floor in the corridor till they could inspect him.

And at that very same time the next day the English thirst mate got up, swallowed the second gutta-percha pill down to his innards, ate a light breakfast of chicken and rice, took a drink of impressed air, and said, “Where is my Russian buddy? I’m going to look for him.”

He got dressed and off he ran.

In some amazing way the thirst mate found Lefty very quickly; only, they hadn’t yet put him on a bed. He was still lying in the hall on the floor, and he complained to the Englishman. “I’ve just got to have two words with the Emperor,” he said.

The Englishman ran off to Count Kleinmichel[12] and ripped and roared. “Really, now, this is the limit!” he said. “Though only a sheepskin coat it be, in its wearer a human soul we see.”

For this statement the Englishman was turned out at once, so that he shouldn’t dare mention the human soul again. After that, somebody said to him, “You’d do better to go around to Platov the Cossack; he’s got simple feelings.”

The Englishman got hold of Platov, who by this time was lying again on his bed. Platov listened to his story and remembered Lefty.

“Why, of course, brother,” he said. “I know him very well. I’ve even dragged him around by the hair. Only, I don’t know how I can help him in this kind of trouble, because I’ve served out my time and got a full apple plexy—now they don’t pay attention to me anymore. But you just run over to the Commandant Skobelev;[13] he’s in full force, and he’s also had experience in this line—he’ll do something.”

The thirst mate went to Skobelev and told all about what sort of illness Lefty had and how it had happened. Skobelev said, “I understand that illness; only, the Germans don’t know how to treat it; here you have to have some kind of doctor from the spiritual profession, because they have grown up with these cases and they can help; I’ll send over the Russian doctor Martyn-Solsky right away.”[14]

But when Martyn-Solsky got there, Lefty was already dying, because he had cracked open the back of his head when they dropped him on the cold depravement; and he was able to say only one thing clearly: “Tell the Emperor that the English don’t clean their rifles with brick dust, and we must stop it too, or else God save us from a war, because they won’t be any good for shooting.”

And with this loyalty Lefty crossed himself and kicked the bucket.

Martyn-Solsky went out at once and reported this to Count Chernyshov,[15] so that he could tell the Emperor, but Count Chernyshov shouted at him. “Look here now,” he said, “your job is laxatives and purgatives. Don’t stick your nose into other people’s business: in Russia we’ve got generals for that.”

So nothing was said to the Emperor, and the cleaning went on in the same old way right up to the Crimean War. At that time, when they started loading their rifles, the bullets just rattled around in them, because the barrels had been cleaned out with brick dust.

Then Martyn-Solsky reminded Count Chernyshov about Lefty, and Count Chernyshov said, “Go to the devil, you public enema, and don’t stick your nose into other people’s business, or I’ll deny I ever heard about that from you, and then you yourself will catch it.”

Martyn-Solsky thought, “And he really will deny it.” So he kept quiet.

But if only they had reported Lefty’s words in time to the Emperor, the war against the enemy in Crimea would have taken an entirely different turn.

19

Now all this is “affairs of long-gone days” and “traditions of yore”[16] even though this yore is not very old. But there is no need to be hasty about forgetting these traditions, despite the incredible nature of the legend and the epic character of its principal hero. Lefty’s real name, like the names of many of the greatest geniuses, has been lost to posterity forever; but he is interesting as the embodiment of a myth in the popular imagination, and his adventures can serve to remind us of an epoch whose general spirit has been portrayed here clearly and accurately.

It goes without saying that Tula no longer has such master craftsmen as the legendary Lefty: machines have evened up the inequalities in gifts and talents, and genius no longer strains itself in a struggle against diligence and exactness. Even though they encourage the raising of salaries, machines do not encourage artistic daring, which sometimes went so far beyond ordinary bounds as to inspire the folk imagination to create unbelievable legends like this one.

The workmen, of course, can appreciate the advantages they have gained through practical applications of mechanical science, but they still recall those olden times with pride and affection. These memories are their epic—an epic that has a genuinely “human soul.”

1881

Translated by William Edgerton

THE UNMERCENARY ENGINEERS

From the Stories of Three Righteous Men

Life's Apocrypha: A Foreword

OVER MANY years of literary work I have collected numerous records of various stories and persons from the not so distant past, the 1830s and '40s. I have printed some of my collection in the newspaper *New Times* as extracts from the notes of Ismailov, the secretary to the synod. Readers have found these stories intriguing, and nobody has challenged a single one of the events that I related. I chose other extracts for the magazine *The Historical Herald*: these, too, found attentive readers and were also exempt from any categorical refutation. I, however, know that among the stories I have found in manuscripts or which I have personally recorded from oral accounts by elderly persons, there are some that are not, historically speaking, completely reliable, and some that are even in direct contradiction with what we know from other sources. This is why I do not claim that the stories I offer are true; I would rather consider them as apocrypha, in which not everything perhaps is true and a few things are definitely untrue; but this fact does not prevent them from being significant. None of them presents us with events in the dry, albeit precise, form we find in investigations and documents; here we see them as they appeared to people who lived then and whose conception of these events was formed by firsthand impressions, with the addition of personal considerations, assumptions, and guesswork. Such perceptions may not be fully accurate, but they are interesting, and they make for just as vivid a story as any historical tale or novel in which the plot itself and the details are invented by an author. In any case, I myself am inventing nothing in these stories: I am merely passing on what was believed by people who were alive at the time and who put their own interpretation on whatever they heard and saw.

I begin with events whose discrepancies with historical truth are most striking, and even puzzling, since we are dealing with a person whose life history can be checked against something as obvious as his service record. But that only goes to show how often people in those times neglected precise details, preferring to compose their own histories and to explain the mental states and moral causes that led individuals to commit unusual acts.

The fact that, influenced by their own inclinations and assumptions, they *invented* things about these individuals allows us to form a fairly accurate idea of the tastes and thoughts of those who did the inventing: that phenomenon, without doubt, defines the spirit of the times.

1

In the 1830s, in the Petersburg College of Engineering, a very original and high-minded school of thought arose: it could be called a striving for irreproachable honesty, even sanctity. Among the young men who were adepts of this school, three in particular were especially enthusiastic: Dmitri Brianchaninov, Misha Chikhachiov, and Nikolai Fermor. All three students were intriguing characters, and their fates are of general interest. In addition, their stories provide useful data for characterizing the 1830s, as well as for clarifying today's differences of opinion on the importance of schooling and the independence of a human being's character.

Dmitri Aleksandrovich Brianchaninov was the trailblazer of this new school of thought. He led a circle of people who loved and respected "sanctity and honor," so we should discuss him before talking about the others. Piety and Christian virtue seemed to be innate to Brianchaninov. To judge, at least, by a book written about him, he had been religiously fervent since childhood, and if we believe Gall and Lavater's phrenological systems, then Brianchaninov's skull had all the typical signs of "exalted worship of God."

As a boy, he was very good-looking, which, combined with his reserve and his aristocratic manners, made people like him a great deal. But Brianchaninov had been cautious ever since childhood and was discriminating in his response to any affection; generally, he was extremely shy.

That was why he was able to find his feet from the very first day.

Soon after Brianchaninov was admitted to the College of Engineering, there was a visit by the soon-to-be emperor Nicholas Pavlovich, who was at the time still grand duke. Nicholas visited quite often, but this time his visit had a special purpose, namely "the choice of stipendiaries."

Nicholas had formed a custom of personally selecting the youths from the college who would receive

stipends; his criterion in this case was not their grades in the entrance examination, but his own personal judgment upon inspection. In other words, the grand duke appointed as stipendiaries those who appealed to him.

Everyone knows that this future emperor was very confident of his judgment and intuition and held firm to his so-called first impressions. Brianchaninov made such a favorable impression on the grand duke that the latter not only immediately appointed him as a stipendiary but ordered the boy to put on his outdoor clothes right away and to wait for him outside the building. As he departed the college, Nicholas took Brianchaninov with him in his carriage,[1] and when they reached the Anichkov Palace, led him to the quarters of Grand Duchess Alexandra Fiodorovna, the future empress.

The grand duchess was at her desk in her study; she didn't hear her husband enter with the pupil Brianchaninov and didn't even turn to look at them.

The grand duke took Brianchaninov by the shoulder and stood him behind the future empress's chair, while he gently embraced his wife, kissed her head, and told her in French, "I've brought my new stipendiary to present to you. Take a look at him."

The future empress turned around and looked at the boy through her lorgnette; she said, smiling with satisfaction, "He's a fine boy."

After that, Brianchaninov was given a generous lunch in the palace and sent back to the college, where the people who were waiting for him immediately subjected him to detailed questioning about his experience.

The youth, modest but truthful, told them everything exactly as it had happened.

The grand duke's blessing turned out to be of great service to him.

From then on, the college authorities kept a close eye on Brianchaninov. The youth's character and abilities were studied, identified with precision, and the very first time that the grand duke inquired "How is Brianchaninov?" he received the perfectly just answer, "Exemplary in all respects."

"I'm extremely glad," Nicholas remarked with satisfaction: this was a case where he was pleased that his insight had been confirmed. "And what are his inclinations and character like?"

"He's very religious and his morality is excellent."

"I'm extremely glad, and I would very much like the others to be the same. Let him be an example to them."

These remarks by the Emperor were instantly made known to the other students, who in no time formed a circle of youths wanting to imitate Brianchaninov as closely as possible: Brianchaninov took on the role of leader in this circle.

2

Being singled out by the grand duke had an effect on Brianchaninov: he suddenly seemed to mature more quickly and become even more serious. His circle of friends consisted of about ten boys, and Misha Chikhachiov was from the start a particularly close friend of Brianchaninov, who shared with Chikhachiov his innermost feelings and most sacred ideas about his inclinations and goals.

"What's most important in our situation now," Brianchaninov urged his friend, "is to guard against pride. I don't know whether or not I should be grateful for having the grand duke's favor without earning it, but I never stop thinking about keeping what I treasure most. I have to keep an eye on myself and not allow myself to begin to get too proud. I'm asking you as my friend: watch over me and warn me not to lose my purity of soul."

Chikhachiov promised to do so. "Excellent," he said, "I'll always tell you the truth, but there won't be any need, because you've already found the way to save yourself from temptation."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You yourself said the important thing is *not to begin*, and if you are never going to begin, then nothing's going to begin."

"You're right," Brianchaninov replied after a moment's thought. "But . . . all the same, watch over me. I'm afraid I may be drawn to the wrong path by those who are supposed to set me an example. After all, we 'must submit to those in authority over us . . .' "

"Yes, that's true," Chikhachiov said, and then noticed that Brianchaninov's face suddenly seemed to be lit up by a joyful thought. He took both of his comrade's hands, pressed them in his own, and looking upward with grave exaltation, seemed to read something under the cornice of the high-ceilinged room. "I can see just one true way to avoid the danger of temptation which people offer, and you may be able to guess what it is . . ."

“I suspect I can guess what you are thinking of.”

“I think one has to have one’s eyes constantly on God as He was incarnated.”

“You’re right.”

“Believe me, if we never take our mind’s eye off of Him, and if we try in every way to follow His example, then we are in no danger. He will save us from the danger of losing ourselves in any quandary that life presents.”

“That is my belief.”

“He is with us now, and we are in Him, and He is in us. I think I have now grasped a new, amazing sense in these words.”

“So have I.”

The two comrades embraced solemnly and from then on became inseparable friends. Their friendship, however, did have a distinctly ascetic quality about it. It was aimed at mutual support in a common striving to distance themselves from life’s temptations and to focus on the lofty idea that exalted them, the idea of a pure life in the spirit of Christian teachings.

3

There were at the time several paths that educated Russians with such inclinations chose in order to attain their Christian ideal: the paths most people preferred were biblical pietism or a gravitation toward Catholicism. But Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov followed neither of these; they chose a third path, which was only then becoming known but would later become established in society: Orthodoxy in the spirit of Metropolitan Bishop Mikhail. At that time, many people with pious and virtuous aims and educated tastes were quite unable, for various reasons, to “accept everything as set out in the catechism,” but neither did they wish to listen to “alien voices” outside the church. Only in Mikhail’s expositions and teachings could they find any resolution of their agonizing contradictions. What person of conscience does not value the discovery of how to reconcile religion with his conscience? As a result, Mikhail had a great number of followers who remained faithful to him even after it was recognized that not everything in his works was “acceptable.”

Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were the most fervent followers of the Most Reverend Mikhail.[2] They were receptive to his religious opinions and followed his direction, a way of avoiding the influence of Catholicism, so alien to Russian nature, without divesting believers of all ecclesiastical warmth, a fate to which those who followed strictly pietistic traditions were doomed.

Both young men began from an early age to lead lives of extreme self-denial, not just in their diets but above all in their renunciation of anger, lies, irritability, vindictiveness, and flattery. This gave their characters a tone not only of nobility but of pious virtue, which was soon noticed, first by their fellow students and then by the authorities. Brianchaninov was granted a degree of respect among pupils such as no other student of the College of Engineering had ever before attained or ever would attain. Everyone trusted him, and nobody ever had reason to regret being frank with him, but this frankness also had a peculiar quality of setting boundaries, something that fit the character of this virtuous youth who was at an early stage nicknamed “the monk” by his comrades. You could never talk to Brianchaninov about any schoolboy obscenities, since he was always serious and disliked the sort of bad schoolboy behavior so current in the elite Russian colleges. Nor did Brianchaninov or Chikhachiov ever take part in any pranks or dares. They said outright that they didn’t want to know about them because they didn’t want to be asked about such things: they couldn’t tell lies, but they did not want to inform on anyone. This firmness and frankness put them in a position that was special and excellent, for they never found themselves forced to protect anyone by lying or to inform on anybody. The teachers, too, knew about Brianchaninov’s and Chikhachiov’s “spirit” and never asked them anything whenever it seemed necessary to investigate misbehavior by the cadets. Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were never offered such revelations by their comrades, but when it was a question of anything else, for instance a serious misunderstanding or someone’s affliction or suffering, then the other cadets did not hesitate to turn to the “pious comrade monks” for the very warm, friendly sympathy they always received. Brianchaninov was their resort in cases when pupils had disagreements, and his opinion was decisive for them, even though he personally always distanced himself from judgment over others, saying, “Nobody has appointed me to judge people and apportion blame.” But he himself shared anything that could be shared with those who were in need.

Although Chikhachiov shared his friend Brianchaninov’s spirit, he was of secondary importance: on the one hand, this was because Brianchaninov had more pronounced abilities and a fine gift for words; on

the other hand, because Chikhachiov was younger and deliberately effaced himself, preferring in every case to let his friend take the lead.

Their influence on the other cadets was strong: both of them were fine students, and the institution's administration hoped that they would turn into excellent engineers. The grand duke was also convinced of this: he "very much wanted to see decent people in the engineering department."

Both friends completed their courses in 1826, holding on to their prestigious positions until the last day of their studies in the college, which retained the best memories of them. They also left a number of followers, among whom a certain Nikolai Fermor, of whom we shall tell more, was particularly outstanding for his directness and unbending will.

4

After completing their cadet courses at the College of Engineering, Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were free to find an apartment, and they settled in the Lopatin House, a big and uncomely building on Nevsky Prospect. This house no longer exists: it was pulled down and today's Pushkin Street now crosses its extensive courtyard.

Escaping from the supervision to which they had been subjected in a closed institution, the friends enjoyed great freedom and could now dispose of their time according to their wishes and tastes. They did so. They led an extremely severe and purely monastic way of life: they observed fast days, never went to any entertainments or on any outings, avoided frivolous acquaintances, and went every day to church. In the mornings they rose at first light and walked to the Neva monastery where they attended early matins, and then they had tea there with Viktor, a vociferous deacon monk.[3] This Viktor is reported to have been a very inadequate monk: he led a rather drunken life and was rude to everybody, but all his faults were forgiven because of his fine voice and exceptional skill in conducting the choir at solemn church services. As a person, he was very kind, straightforward, and frank: he was quite incapable of anything underhanded or insincere. It was his directness that enabled him to inspire permanent fear in the notorious Andrei Nikolaevich Muraviov,[4] whom Viktor thought to be "loathsome" and whose young "Saint-Cyrs" he called "guttersnipes" and simply chased away.

After praying at early matins and taking tea with Viktor, the friends went to officers' classes at their College of Engineering. They stayed for the prescribed time, then went home to a modest meal and spent the rest of the day studying. After that, they read theological and religious books, here too singling out among many works those of Metropolitan Bishop Mikhail.[5]

This writer's gentle, peace-loving Christian philosophy had a strong effect on both young men; it altered the paths of their lives and activities. The first harm Mikhail caused them was their refusal to serve in the armed forces, and they would not undertake any duties imposed on them by their service, for which they had been prepared by their special military education. Now they were out of step with the general mood then prevailing at the College of Engineering, which was supervised by General Lamnovsky, whose name is historically linked with supplying the state with marble, so that he is known as "marble Lamnovsky." Many people at the College of Engineering were preoccupied with making money and did what they could to set up the process "in a proper and brotherly way" by elaborating a profiteering system they called *self-reward*.

The "monks" refused to kill people or to defraud the state: for that reason, and possibly out of inexperience, they considered it out of the question to pursue careers as engineers or military men. They decided to distance themselves from such a career, even though it offered them very good prospects, given their useful relations and Emperor Nicholas's special interest in Brianchaninov. Although the Emperor inquired after him less often than before, nevertheless Brianchaninov, had he wanted to, given his personal ties, could easily have reminded the Emperor of his existence and the latter would doubtless have offered his almighty assistance. But Brianchaninov was not interested; moreover, he deterred his relatives from making any interventions of this kind on his behalf. He was trying to stay unnoticed and modest and seemed to have something else on his mind.

Chikhachiov behaved in exactly the same way. Provisionally, however, they both graduated from their officer classes to serve in the army: Brianchaninov graduated from the senior class for Dinaburg, and Chikhachiov left the junior class for a sappers' training battalion. Thus they were parted for a while, but in 1827 Brianchaninov successfully asked to be released and left for the Svir monastery, where he stayed as a novice monk. Other sources give different information: interestingly, an apocryphal version gives us a more detailed and fuller account of the poetic struggle of the young ascetics than do the stories told in society.

According to their contemporaries, Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were of two minds about leaving the lay world for a monastery and decided to do so only when they were faced with the necessity of taking up arms for actual military action.

As soon as war broke out between Russia and Turkey, Chikhachiov and Brianchaninov simultaneously put in requests for early retirement. This was as illegal as it was strange, even shameful, since it made them look like cowards; nevertheless they ignored the consequences and asked to be released from military service.

The true reason for their refusal of military service was not specified in their petitions, and only their families and friends knew they found military action incompatible with Christian convictions. Being consistent and sincere, they not only refused to take up arms but decided they could not even do preparatory work for warfare. Even erecting defenses seemed to them something that could not be done with a clear conscience. They felt they had either to accept a system of self-reward or resist those whose orders they would be asked to carry out.

There may have been, of course, a considerable exaggeration by the young men of the danger of their careers, but at the time bribery was rampant and even Emperor Nicholas, as shown by many stories printed later, found himself unable to prevent graft, the most terrible evil of his time.

Our monks thought that serving honestly would involve constantly obstructing all those who wished to make money, which would necessarily give rise to disputes and disagreements without any hope of restoring truth and justice or of preventing the abuses that were prevalent everywhere. They realized that they would be taking a heroic step that demanded enormous strength, which they didn't feel they possessed, so they decided to run away from it.

The man who would fight more boldly was still growing up.

5

When the Emperor was informed that Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov had petitioned for retirement, he lost his temper, said, "This is nonsense!" and refused to release them. They had to submit; but for those who had good connections at the time, much could be achieved that was impossible for people in ordinary positions. After a while, when Russian troops began moving into Turkey, Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov petitioned again for retirement. This time they resorted to using the connections of kinship they had earlier refused to exploit for other goals. These connections were so powerful that their petitions were somehow granted without the knowledge of the Emperor. Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were discreetly allowed to retire.

This retirement apparently happened when the army was already on the move, and the young friends had to let their units continue without them, enduring their comrades' conjectures and grumbling. Some envious comrades derided them as young lords avoiding service at a time of danger, while others despised them as cowards.

The friends had foreseen that their actions would be interpreted in this way: they bore the unpleasantness with a calmness they had long cultivated. They consoled themselves with the knowledge that they were not cowards, that they were not avoiding war because they feared death, and, as a result, they felt no resentment. They were anxious to "run from the army" as fast and as discreetly as possible.

In actual fact their withdrawal looked like desertion. Any mention of their being released from their units was avoided—they were apparently being "sent" somewhere. They simply vanished, thus avoiding many other disagreeable moments to come.[6]

At first they seem to have set off northward together, but their paths separated. Brianchaninov went to Petersburg, where it seemed very dangerous for him to stay, because he was constantly at risk of being seen by the Emperor; Chikhachiov went to stay with his sister, Olga Vasilievna, who was married to a Kutuzov.[7] Chikhachiov spoke little about his return, and only vaguely, and said nothing at all about his future plans. He struck people as "strange," as if he were lost or alienated from the world and incapable of experiencing any joys or griefs. In a young man this was a very depressing spectacle, and Chikhachiov's family joined forces in trying to find out "what was going on in his mind." Some thought he was in love, others suspected he was involved in something; one relative with a freethinking bent asserted that his nephew was "crazy."

"Crazy about what?"

"Too proud. He wants to be better than anyone else. He's a sanctimonious snob. The world can sink in stinking sin, and he'll just sit there, like a thrush in a birch tree, grooming its feathers with its beak. Sanctimonious snob!"

Nobody paid attention to the freethinker. One day Chikhachiov disappeared from the house.

His mother and sister were in despair, especially his mother, whose anxiety was deepened by a whole mass of presumptions and guesses, each more alarming than the last. The situation was horrible. The family was trying to find the runaway, and at the same time feared that rumors of his disappearance might spread far and wide. It was essential that the news did not reach the Emperor in Petersburg. They were terribly afraid of everything, and with good reason. A major search had begun and would continue for a long time. Members of the missing man's family as well as their serfs, especially devoted and trustworthy servants, were involved in the search. Letters, cautious but fervent, were exchanged with whoever could be involved, but nothing led to any results. Even the freethinker was asked; instead of replying, the freethinker advised a reading of *The Life of Aleksei, Man of God*, since, in his opinion, Chikhachiov was most likely to be envious of the example of that particular saint. People nodded at the "unfeeling cynic's" hints, but still no trace of the missing runaway was found anywhere. The family, especially the mother, endured great suffering and, worse, was forced to stay silent and pretend that the young man was not missing. So it went on until he himself finally announced that he was in the Nikolo-Babaevsky monastery at Babayki on the Volga. The freethinker had come closer than anyone else to the truth: both friends, Chikhachiov and Brianchaninov, turned up together at Babayki, where they both began monastic careers,[8] something that they were born for and which at their school they had been predicted to do.

It remained a secret between the two of them where Chikhachiov, after running away from his sister's estate, had met with Brianchaninov, who had appeared for a short while in Petersburg. The secret may not be so very important, but all the same it was something they never spoke of. The important fact is when and where this "following of Aleksei, Man of God" began, and how it developed, given that we have two innate characters remarkable in their integrity and consistency.

The ambience or the ideology of the school had been unable to alter them, any more than flattering imperial favor, or strict condemnation, or reproaches for the vice of cowardice, which would have been bound to wound their sense of dignity, had that dignity not found justification in a higher ideal. Even if this ideal may be thought narrow, it nevertheless demanded real courage to put it fully into practice. As it turned out, neither Brianchaninov nor Chikhachiov lacked courage.

6

A number of years were devoted to peaceful monastic duties before Brianchaninov was once more seen by the Emperor. The man who decided to arrange the meeting was the metropolitan bishop of Moscow, Filaret Drozdov, who was, of course, perfectly aware that Emperor Nicholas had refused to allow Brianchaninov to retire. Any reminder was bound to make the Emperor recollect the whole story, and he might well ask who released Brianchaninov and when. But this didn't stop Filaret from presenting Brianchaninov, a man now adapted to goals utterly different from those for which the Petersburg College of Engineering had prepared him.

About ten years had passed without Emperor Nicholas mentioning either Brianchaninov or Chikhachiov. Then, during one of his visits to Moscow, the Emperor went to see Metropolitan Bishop Filaret and expressed his dissatisfaction with certain events that testified to serious depravity in the monasteries.[9] The metropolitan bishop did not deny this but said that there was now a fine abbot, a genuine monk, who could be relied on, and who could help to cleanse and correct these misdeeds in the monasteries.

"Who is this unusual person?" asked the Emperor.

"Ignati Brianchaninov."

"Brianchaninov? I do remember a Brianchaninov in the College of Engineering."

"The very same man."

"Did he really become a monk?"

"He's an abbot now."

"Yes, I remember; even in the college he was outstanding for his piety and excellent behavior. I'm very glad that he has found his vocation and could prove useful for dealing with the monks. They're impossible."

"Father Ignati has already put a number of monasteries into excellent shape."

"In that case, if you say he has put them into good shape, I would ask you to let me have him to clean up, at least a bit, my Petersburg Saint Sergius Hermitage. The monks there are behaving so badly that they are a serious source of corruption."

“Your Imperial Majesty’s will shall be done; I have firm hopes that Ignati Brianchaninov will turn out to be a force for good anywhere you choose to appoint him.”

“I’m very glad, but I’m sorry he’s the only one: one swallow doesn’t make a summer.”

“He has his friend, a monk just as strict, Chikhachiov.”

“Heavens, Chikhachiov! That’s a man from the same brood: a cadet of mine.”

“Exactly, Your Majesty.”

“Then please transfer them together.”

Brianchaninov arrived at Saint Sergius Hermitage as the new abbot and brought his friend Chikhachiov, who from then on became his assistant: both began “cleansing” and “straightening out” the monks of Saint Sergius, whose way of life had in fact by then become a real source of corruption, legendary tales of which even today amuse the kind of people who like that sort of thing.[10]

Ignati Brianchaninov’s subsequent clerical career is well known. He became a bishop, despite lacking the educational qualifications, and he had many admirers and many enemies.

Chikhachiov never rose to such lofty hierarchical rank, nor did he strive for it. All his life he preferred a quiet, inconspicuous position, and he went on effacing himself, not only when he was a colleague of his friend Brianchaninov but later too. He was a superb musician, singer, and reciter, and worked with the choir and with readings; this was the only area in which he was famous. He conducted himself like a true monk, although he never lost his bearing and good manners, even when following a strict monastic regimen. He kept to this regimen with unusual dignity, rejecting every temptation to proclaim that he was endowed with special gifts.

Even the pious ladies, who in Russia can give a monk the reputation of a saint or a miracle worker in his own lifetime, didn’t dare to assert anything special about Chikhachiov. He refused to prophesy or to perform miracles.

To some extent we can form an idea of Chikhachiov’s musical knowledge and vocal abilities from an incident that has been reliably reported. Maria Pavlovna Fermor, a relative of his, was married to Kavelin, the governor-general of Petersburg, and Chikhachiov was a frequent visitor to the household. Once, when he was sitting with Maria, the famous musician Rubini came to say goodbye to her. Introducing Rubini to her other guests, she told him that Chikhachiov was her uncle and that he was a fine musician, despite being a monk, and had a superb voice.

“But he’s never heard you,” Maria added.

“How can that be?”

“Because clerics in the country are not allowed to go to the theater.”

“What a pity,” replied Rubini, “music ennobles the feelings, and the theater can arouse very profound thoughts.”

“Well, whatever the case, we have a rule that monks do not go to listen to operas.”

“But all the same, your uncle might have attended a concert of mine.”

Maria smiled as she replied, “Our monks are forbidden even to go to concerts.”

“That’s barbaric!” exclaimed Rubini. “But I assume you’ll break that rule and won’t forbid me to sing in your uncle’s presence.”

“I’d be delighted if you would.”

Energetically getting to his feet and turning to Chikhachiov, Rubini asked, “And you wouldn’t have any objections, would you?”

“I shall be very happy to listen to the famous Rubini.”

“In that case, Rubini will have two reasons for singing: first, to give pleasure to the lady of the house and to my musical colleague, and second, to annoy those coarse persons who do not understand that music is a noble art.”

Maria opened up the grand piano and sat down to accompany the singer, while Rubini stood by her and sang some of his best arias for Chikhachiov. Chikhachiov listened with profound attention, and, when the singing stopped, he said, “Your brilliant reputation does not in the least exaggerate the merits of your voice and your skill. Your singing is superb.”

Rubini was extremely pleased by Chikhachiov’s praise, expressed with such modesty and dignity. Naturally, for many years he had been sickened and bored by all the vulgar exclamations of cheap delight that people with banal tastes consider essential when greeting artists. Chikhachiov’s words really did express praise that could be accepted without blushing for the person uttering them. Shaking the monk’s hand, Rubini said, “I’m very glad that you like my singing, but I’d like to have an idea of your own voice.”

Without saying a word, Chikhachiov got up, then sat at the piano, and accompanying himself, sang an ecclesiastical piece.

Rubini was ecstatic. He said that he'd never in his life come across such an amazing basso profundo and that he was sorry the best composers were ignorant of the existence of such a voice.

"What would the point be, if they knew?" Chikhachiov responded.

"The most inspired lines of music could be written for your voice, and your fame would probably be greater than mine."

Chikhachiov said nothing; sitting sideways to the keyboard, he quietly fingered the keys. Rubini arose and began taking his leave of Maria and her guest. Offering Chikhachiov his hand, he shook it strongly once more, looked Chikhachiov in the eye, and exclaimed with delight, "Oh, what a voice! What a voice is going to waste, unheard and unknown!"

"It's not going to waste: I use it to sing to my God as long as I live," said Chikhachiov in Russian.

Rubini asked for a translation of this remark; he then shrugged and said, "Aha! Yes, yes . . . that's another matter."

Unfortunately, the elderly witness of this encounter was unable to remember what Chikhachiov sang for Rubini in Maria Kavelina's drawing room. Chikhachiov's voice had a remarkable basso profundo, which is very important in a choir but not for a soloist; for this reason it would be very interesting to know what music Chikhachiov could have performed alone, with his basso profundo, and performed so perfectly that it made Rubini ecstatic.

Perhaps somebody has heard from some other witness or contemporary with a better memory. It would be quite possible, since news of Rubini's meeting with Chikhachiov in the governor-general's drawing room and the story of everything that happened there spread, they say, very quickly in "society" and became the gossip of the entire city. Emperor Nicholas also knew of it and was extremely pleased by Chikhachiov's reply, "I use it to sing to my God."

7

Even after Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov had left the College of Engineering, their spirit lived on, and the younger boys, in turn, were "imbued" by it and likewise exhibited qualities that made them utterly unsuitable for the military service for which their special education had predestined them. One of the most imbued was Nikolai Fermor.

The two Fermor brothers, Pavel and Nikolai, were being educated at the College of Engineering. Pavel, the elder brother, was a contemporary and friend of Brianchaninov and was directly influenced by him spiritually. Nikolai, the younger brother, attended the school after his brother, entering the College of Engineering when Emperor Nicholas was no longer just grand duke. By that point Nicholas had stopped paying close attention to the college, as well as to many other causes; only oral reports mention his occasional visits to the college during his evening walk, sometimes with Empress Alexandra. She would be left waiting in the hall while the Emperor did the rounds of the dormitories, where the pupils were by then asleep. General Lamnovsky had more opportunities than anyone else to meet the grand duke and make himself seem very devoted to his inspector's duties, a devotion that was actually quite false.

After Nicholas acceded to the throne, it was his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich, who was the chief patron of the College of Engineering. Mikhail had a reputation for being very stern and awe-inspiring: he loved being feared, and the youth were indeed afraid of him, to the point of trembling. Under Mikhail, Lamnovsky held on to his job, as he had under Nicholas. The same ethos was maintained in the college: some employed the system of self-reward, while others studied and adapted to it, each as he considered right in his own mind. Some ended up as mercenary as Lamnovsky; others were less bold but more subtle in not "sullying themselves with such trivia." After Warsaw was captured, when new fortresses began to be built in Novogeorgievsk and other places in the Kingdom of Poland, the system of self-reward apparently reached its apogee. What is most memorable and amazing is the frankness of this tendency among young people: engineering cadets said, cheerfully and unabashed, that they "couldn't understand how being an *engineer* could mean anything but *wallowing in gold*." They had grown up with this conviction, which became ineradicable, and when they graduated they began to practice it.

But in all cases, in all places, there are, and always can be, exceptions who don't fit the general rule: so it was here. Along with those who had adapted themselves to practicing actively the system of self-reward, there were uneasy dissidents, those who "were too imbued with the Brianchaninov spirit." They were called "sectarians" and they were suspect for good reason: people seemed to have a premonition that one of them would eventually turn out to be "a nasty dog in the manger." That was what Nikolai Fermor showed himself to be.

The College of Engineering's Brianchaninov sect, which influenced Nikolai Fermor, had by then undergone a significant change of spirit. Once its founder and first director, Brianchaninov and his friend Chikhachiov had left, the sect lost its predominantly religious tendency but raised its demands on general honesty and high principles.

Naturally, all this involved only a small circle of young men who were not just the minority but were, one might say, a drop in the ocean, a drop it was perfectly convenient to ignore or to dismiss altogether. That was how the authorities regarded the sect: they knew something about its members and called them "dreamers" but not dangerous ones. They weren't an obstacle to anyone in the college, and once they graduated and began to serve, the general attitude, it was believed, would doubtless convince them of the pointlessness of their dreaming and render them no different from the others, who never undertook anything that had an element of dreaming because they held the orthodox belief that to be an engineer meant to wallow in gold. Repeated experiences persuaded and reassured quite serious minds that this assumption was beneficial, so there was no reason to worry about the unmercenary engineers causing any serious harm.

Nikolai Fermor's character, however, was an exception. He drove others to think that his enthusiasm for honesty and high principles might one day be seriously inconvenient and cause a lot of bother.

Such fears were justified.

It was still possible to cope with his preaching of unconditional impartiality and honesty when he was in the college, but he stubbornly held on to the same principles even when he graduated as an officer. Fermor's very first step, when he emerged into society and his former schoolmates gathered to "water their epaulets," was to read verses he himself had composed, calling on the consciences of his fellow diners, inviting them then and there to swear a solemn oath to one another that they would serve the fatherland with complete impartiality and that not only would none of them ever profit from self-reward but they would not allow others to do so and, whatever the consequences, would put a stop to the slightest abuse and show thieves no mercy. Fermor demanded this in his ardent verses, which were said to be rather well written, and he was the first to swear a solemn oath that he would unflaggingly follow this mission all his life.

When he read his poem, he was very heated and excited: his eyes were blazing, he trembled, and his voice rose higher and higher, ending in a hysterical state of ecstasy that many found unpleasant and attributed to the effect of the wine the poet had drunk. The response that the ardent youth had been awaiting did not occur. Nobody argued with him, nobody said that what he was urging on his comrades was bad, but neither did anyone rush to embrace him, nor was there any concordant sound of clinking glasses. On the contrary, many looked down at their cutlery, clearly showing their embarrassment and seeming to find in the poet's words of denunciation something inappropriate, sarcastic, offensive to their seniors, and quite out of step with the lighthearted nature of the gathering. One person, who apparently is still alive and who even recently was making "humorous speeches," put things right by saying that "you have to remember your oath and, as you are now under it, you must not form any new alliances that might be based on exclusive vows and undertakings."

"I, at least, gentlemen," Fermor responded, "remind you that I have taken an oath and I don't want to have anything to do with any alliances."

"Nor do we! Bravo! Hurrah!"

Nikolai Fermor was not embarrassed, but he was very offended; he stood there and waited for the noise to die down, then cast his eyes over his comrades seated at the table, smiled a gloomy smile, and said, "Well, if I have to drink my cup alone, then I'll do so." And he drank his wine and smashed the glass, so as to avoid drinking to any other wish.

This threw yet another inauspicious shadow over the general mood of the gathering. Once again, a few people tried to say something to alleviate the situation, but they failed. One man loudly recited Pushkin's famous poem that ends with the words "Long live *reason*!" and everyone, except for Fermor, drank a toast to it: Fermor could not drink to reason because his glass had been smashed after the toast to honesty in life and in service. He was a man who constantly found himself outside the general trends: he was a lonely "backwoodsman," and everyone was glad when he left the gathering before anyone else. His departure made everyone sigh with relief; the mood of merriment resumed, while he, now alone, took with him his dissatisfaction with others, although he had left, perhaps, even more dissatisfaction in the minds of those other persons.

This earliest incident in Fermor's independent life was the beginning of his excommunication. It was a bad augur for the future, but Fermor wasn't in the least frightened by the situation that was developing.

He made it worse by coming out from time to time with new verses in which he made every effort to chastise as severely and sarcastically as possible profiteering and his profession's other vicious tendencies, which he was so well aware of.

He was reprimanded and told that this was no way to perform his duties.

Fermor then immediately attempted to leave the engineering service, since he feared that his failure to accept the dominant trends in that profession would become even worse. But he was unable to switch to another service. Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich, who knew Fermor in the college, kept him on the Petersburg engineering team.

In Petersburg there were no tasks that might give the fanatically honest young man a pretext for irritation: he put up with his position in the service without complaining. He was even pleased. But it was then (the year 1831) that major construction began in the fortresses of the Kingdom of Poland, where our engineers were wallowing in gold more luxuriously than anywhere. This was no great secret to anybody, but the wallowing did sometimes attract the attention of the Emperor and the grand duke, and then there would be a "renewal of personnel," which in any case did not improve matters at all, for the "renewed personnel" immediately realized that it was quite impossible to resist the general trend, and very soon, without a word of protest, they became as bad as their predecessors.

Anyone who was reluctant, or inept, or just afraid, and thus refused to step into the flowing stream to wallow in the gold would be picked up with extreme care and kindness by their seniors and, as in a good family, dipped into the golden baths.

Things were arranged so smoothly that anyone who refused personally to be involved in certain deals was never compelled to handle them personally. In this particular unit the senior officer dealt personally with the suppliers and quantity surveyors and then shared with all his colleagues, without any explanation of the ways and means or sources of the income. Given this system, everyone wallowed without doing any violence to his modesty or conscience. You could hardly denounce your seniors, and, in any case, where would your proof be? People would say, "It's not true," or "If everyone opens their mouth, truth goes out of the window."

Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich had a high opinion of Nikolai Fermor as an able officer and engineer: consequently, one fine day Fermor was dumbfounded to receive a transfer from Petersburg to Warsaw, where there were at that time a large number of engineering projects.

Fermor was not at all pleased: he seemed to sense that things would go badly for him there, but he didn't have the resoluteness of a Brianchaninov or Chikhachiov, so he didn't run away from the service to hide under a monk's cassock. In any case, the ideal of Aleksei, Man of God, which led Chikhachiov and Brianchaninov to strengthen their resolve, was no longer an ideal for Fermor, who began his adult life later than they. Fermor was religious too, but he refused to flee from lay life. To the contrary, he wanted to fight evil, to bring as much truth and light as he could into life. Fermor was a man of civic virtues, and he had no use for either asceticism or flights of fancy in the poetry of beauty or the delights of love. He wrote quite good poetry, but he wasn't interested in "Terpsichore's feet": what he wanted was to arouse a spirit of honesty in everyday relations, and in that sense he was way ahead of his times. Thus he was inevitably bound to make a lot of enemies and ill-wishers.

9

The unit Nikolai Fermor joined when he arrived in Warsaw was managed by an engineer who had set up a system of self-reward in the most well-organized way. Nobody except the unit commander ever had cause to take money for himself or to enter into any direct relationship with subcontractors or building-material suppliers. The commander took full responsibility upon himself, keeping his subordinates out of any deals "to avoid any confusion." None of the officers ever received anything from outsiders directly, but every man was issued each month, in addition to their state salary, a "bonus" or "one-off payment," and all they knew about its origin was that it was "from the kitty." Everyone had an idea how that kitty was made up: the senior officer took or "economized" and then "shared out, like a priest to his deacons and sextons." Those deacons and sextons received what their reverend senior gave them, and the beneficiaries were not meant to know the particulars. They were even obliged to refrain from poking into the details, so that the broth would not be spoiled by too many cooks. They received the portion their fatherly commander allotted them, and then went on working with a clear conscience, carrying out their senior officer's orders and never contradicting anything he said.

The system of self-reward had been developed here to the greatest degree of efficiency, and everyone was satisfied, all the more because the chief priest of the regiment's clergy was expert in filling the kitty

and generous in dispensing it.

When the kitty was due to be shared, each man received a sum of money that made their official salary seem by comparison a mere trifle. However, that official trifle was all they had to sign for, while the most important payment from the kitty was handed out with no receipts, in a casual, domestic way. Etiquette forbade any inquiries into how much the commander had collected, but those whom he showered with gifts were all pleased, because he was “a man of high principles and not miserly with his handouts.”

Everyone liked the arrangement; nobody wanted to change it. Then suddenly that “milksop” Fermor arrived from Petersburg and not only caused terrible upsets with his reckless behavior but raised a scandal that shook the whole community and society, so that it became necessary to get rid of him.

10

Nikolai Fermor got to Warsaw as expected, taking into consideration the number of kilometers to be traveled, and “as an officer very highly recommended by the grand duke,” he was received with special attention.

“The grand duke himself chose you to be sent here,” Fermor was told by his unit commander. “We’re very glad to have you, we need good young men, and we’ll do our best to see that you’re happy here.”

Fermor thanked him.

“Yes, we’ll take care of you: that’s the way we do things here. We consider you as one of us from the day you were appointed. Now you must rest after the journey.”

Fermor went to have a rest; later, when he had rested, he presented himself and asked to be given whatever tasks were indicated.

He was told that he need not worry about this, that “tasks will come when they’re ready.” But “meanwhile” he had not been assigned to anything in particular.

“Then what am I to do? How do I fill my time?”

The commander did not like this eagerness, and he immediately looked at Fermor as he would at someone undisciplined and with “peculiarities of character.” At the time, anything in the least peculiar in any respect was disliked and thought to be suspect; at the very least, peculiarities inspired no trust in others: they aroused anxiety. Desirable people were of “stereotypical issue,” as like one another “as buttons on a uniform.”

Fermor did not fit into this category, and his eagerness for something to do instantly made him disliked.

His commander responded, coldly and curtly, “Walk around and take a look: we’ll see what you’re good for.”

Fermor started walking around and taking a look, but he immediately reinforced his seniors’ dim view of him: they felt that he was taking far too close a look.

“Why does he have to do this?”

They corresponded with Petersburg to find out what the authorities thought of him and what his family connections were.

They received a reassuring answer: the authorities had no particular information about the young engineer, except that the Grand Duke Mikhail looked on him favorably, because he had known Fermor at the College of Engineering, where he was a good student and was known for his good conduct. As for his family connections, the Fermors were a good family but without special connections; while Nikolai’s elder brother, Pavel, was serving as an ordinary officer in one of the guards regiments and was, in fact, impecunious.[11]

This information reassured Nikolai’s Warsaw commander, and he decided that he had to keep this young officer.

The very first month, when the time came to receive his salary, Nikolai Fermor presented himself to the treasurer along with the other officers. The treasurer worked with his trunks in a room adjacent to the unit commander’s office. The engineer officers went in to see him one by one, signed the book, and received in one hand from a drawer the sum due to them from the state, which they had signed for, while the other hand received a packet wrapped up in paper, from a basket that lay on the floor next to the treasurer: the packet contained a sum of money considerably larger than the state salary.

The engineers would take this gift from the treasurer’s hands without examining it or signing for it, while the treasurer merely used a pencil to make a tick marking the payment in a special small notebook.

The treasurer was a bit of a “sneerer,” a civil servant who had been a clerk; in his own way, he was

efficient and, in his own way, kindly and very cheerful. Sometimes he would allow officers to “inquire how much was in the packet,” but mostly nobody did this since it was pointless and could only serve to make the authorities suspect insubordination.

The sneerer would twist his lips and say, “Take it on trust; don’t ask questions. Much will be given to believers, and much will be taken from doubters.”

Anyone with any common sense knew that they had to believe, and so they did. And so it was given to them according to their faith.

11

When Nikolai Fermor entered the treasurer’s office, the sneerer made him stand back until the two officers already there had left; then Fermor was offered the official book to sign, and when he had signed for the state money (about forty rubles, apparently) due to him, the treasurer handed him the money, then put his left hand into the basket by his side and handed Fermor a packet of banknotes wrapped tight in a strip of yellow paper.

Putting this packet on the table, next to the state salary that he had counted out, the sneerer took his pencil and made a tick in his notebook, which he then put away in his desk, as he waited for Fermor to leave and make way for the next officer.

Fermor did in fact leave, but he didn’t touch the packet wrapped in yellow paper.

“What are you doing?” the sneerer asked, as Fermor made to go. Fermor stopped. “Why won’t you take it? It’s yours too, after all.”

“What is it?” Fermor asked dubiously.

“It’s the extra that’s due to you.”

“I’ve received everything I’m owed.”

“And you’re owed this, too.” The treasurer’s eyes rested on the package that had been left on the desk.

“Then what is this?” asked Fermor.

The treasurer gave him a meaningful look and replied hesitantly, “Do I have to tell you? It’s money.”

“What money?”

“State banknotes.”

“How much is there in the packet?”

“How much? We don’t talk about such things, but you can count them here and see how much. There’s four hundred rubles.”

“And they’re mine?”

“Yes, yours.”

“I really don’t understand!” Fermor announced, shrugging his shoulders.

“You don’t need to understand,” the sneerer responded and, as Fermor left, he flung the packet meant for the officer back into the basket.

Nikolai Fermor entered the room where the other officers were, singled out those he had gotten to know, and told them indignantly, as if it were a great secret, what a humiliating trick the sneerer had tried to play on him.

“I saw what he was up to,” said Fermor. “He was trying to corrupt me because he wanted to test me, but he’ll never succeed . . . On the other hand, now he’ll never allow himself to try anything with me, or anyone else. The senior officers can do as they like, but people of our generation have to teach these gentlemen to value honesty.”

He intended to add that all the young engineers should form an alliance to support one another in their path of honesty and disinterested service. But he noticed that the group of young men whom he was telling about his “humiliation” had melted away, and he was left in the company of one of the most good-hearted comrades, who was not so much listening to Fermor as persuading him to forget about the matter for the time being and follow “everyone else to the restaurant, since that’s a tradition of ours and it’s bad for anyone to fail to observe our comradely ceremonies.”

“I’ll never allow myself to fail to observe anything comradely, but I’m terribly upset by the treasurer . . . Because of his contempt for my honor . . .”

“Stop it, please, he never even thinks about anyone’s honor!”

“But what makes him so sure of himself? And in any case, I haven’t done anything yet; I’ve only been walking about, taking a look.”

“Well, you should stop poking about . . . Walk around and take a look, then you’ll understand. By the way, we have our own engineers’ room in the restaurant, so let’s get there quickly and not hold anyone

up.”

They went to the “engineers’ section” of the restaurant where Nikolai Fermor re-created, only more graphically, the scene and the part that he had played in Petersburg at the banquet for the newly graduated engineers.

12

Only people who had “silly money” visited the restaurant in Warsaw. True, here you could have the most sophisticated and rare dishes, but everything was extraordinarily expensive. People who didn’t have more than enough to spare had no reason to step over the threshold, and those who did come here were mercilessly fleeced.

The best-loved and most-exploited visitors to the restaurant were the Russian engineers wallowing in gold.

While the Russian army’s troops enchanted Warsaw, the Russian engineers undoubtedly enchanted the Warsaw restaurant and made every effort to instill in the staff of that institution respect for the name of Russia. Distinguished Poles who once upheld the honor of the Polish aristocracy had been taken down a peg, crowded into the “smaller private rooms,” while the Russian engineers took over the biggest room and called it the “engineers’ dining hall.” When they were there, nobody else dared to come and sit down: the engineers might at any time crush him with their grandiose behavior.

Their habits were those of people who were still unsophisticated: on the day they received their salaries and packets wrapped in paper strips, they would invade the restaurant en masse, virtually all of them, including the sneerer. They ate and drank a lot, choosing the best and most expensive items, they stayed there for a long time, as long as they wanted, and they paid for it all in the most dignified way—in other words, without haggling or even working out what they had actually ordered and what was shamelessly added to the bill.

The previous century had been the magnates’ century. The engineers were beginning their own century and, it must be said, they were doing so in style. The dawn of the engineers’ brilliant glory was breaking in Warsaw and in Novogeorgievsk, and its light shone farther, against nature, from west to east, through Kiev, as far as Baku and Lenkoran, where even today the name of the Russian engineer is still celebrated.

It was among people like this, not necessarily lordly but people of untrammeled habits, to say the least, that a crank appeared, inebriated with his own prickly honesty. In this respectable company he behaved like the holy fools of ancient times in the Tsar’s golden chambers. He shrank back, he repelled others, he frowned, was unsociable, and took no active part in his comrades’ feasting and partying: not only did he eat almost nothing, he didn’t drink either. Yet at the same time he sensed hanging over his head something demonic and horrible, like the feeling people have when crossing an abyss. Without swallowing a drop of wine, Fermor became intoxicated just by the vapors, the atmosphere, and he felt an irresistible urge to throw himself into the yawning chasm, a chasm he could easily have walked past if he hadn’t been drawn and pushed into it by all those things that nobody else sensed. His unbending concepts and his sensitive nerves could not endure the bulk of these impressions, and now he was philosophizing and burning with fiery torments.

“Life has let me down!” he reasoned: that was what he wrote in a letter to a relative. “I reckon that it is very difficult, even impossible, for us to live an honest life. If so, then there’s no point in presenting us with examples from the lives of other nations. For other nations, being honest is an advantage, but not for us. In Russia, intellect and honesty are treated far more harshly and mercilessly than inanity and soliciting. Here, all you can expect from honesty is suffering and drudgery. I’ve exhausted my strength almost before I’ve begun to live. If I had a son, I would no longer know how to bring him up. If he is not to be unhappy, he mustn’t be too honest and he must be ready to agree to anything. That is why I shall never have a family of my own. It’s good to admire honest people from a distance, but agonizing to let someone close to you endure all this in person. I sometimes even wonder whether it’s worth living. I can see no sense in living when you have a horrible awareness that there is no place for honesty and genuine high principles in Russian life . . . This is something nobody can put right; consequently, living honestly is impossible . . .”

Suddenly Fermor began talking like this in front of everyone who was seated in the restaurant. Yet, even while speaking, he couldn’t understand why and to what purpose he was saying this. He was quite unable to remember the moment when or the reason why the inspired strings of his prophetic harp began to vibrate, and he set off “to burn men’s hearts with the word.” Yet he realized that he was doing

something utterly unacceptable by upsetting the company, something therefore indecent, even offensive. He could see people getting up and distancing themselves from him, shrugging and glancing at him with contempt. Very soon there was nobody around, except for the sneerer, who was slumped over the table, his head lying on his hands, fast asleep, whistling through his nose as he breathed.

The next day Fermor felt his head full of a thick fog, as if he had drunk far too much, although actually he hadn't touched a drop of wine or spirits. That night he went to bed late, but he kept waking up, as if he had lost a lot of money gambling. His feelings were so much like a gambler's that he even reached out twice for his wallet and carefully checked that it was intact. There was hardly any money left: although Fermor hadn't drunk anything, the others had, and the bill was divided evenly, so that by paying the same as the others, he had handed over almost everything he had on him. In any case, the monthly salary he had received was almost entirely spent.

He was bound to be dismayed by this, because such an expenditure was possible only for those who wallowed in gold; anyone trying to live solely on his state salary could not afford extravagance of this kind. That night Fermor vowed that he would never again be part of such company.

Nobody who wanted to live an honest life could be a big spender or a squanderer. He need not be ashamed of being a pauper. There was no alternative.

Fermor was only a little sorry for the few young engineers whom he considered to be men of a better class, and he was embarrassed at the prospect of refusing to be companions to *them*. But he need not have worried: senior or junior, nobody sought out his company now. Fermor spent another month walking around and taking a look, without any particular assignment, and when the day came for salaries to be paid, the sneerer gave him the state money according to the book, and *two* packets wrapped with strips of paper—for the current month and the previous month.

Fermor pretended that he hadn't noticed this money and took only his salary.

The sneerer snarled even more as he asked, "What? Are you refusing again?"

"Yes, I'm not taking it and never will," Fermor responded curtly, adding that in the future the treasurer should not dare even to suggest such things to him.

"All right, sir," replied the sneerer. He took both packets to the commander's office before Fermor had managed to leave the room.

Fermor hadn't the slightest reason to suspect that the sneerer had hidden the money for his own use: on the contrary, he was obliged to think that the money had been handed over to the commander because Fermor had refused to accept it.

In fact, this was what happened, and from then on everything took on quite a different nature.

From being a Don Quixote, Fermor turned into a tragic hero.

13

The next time Fermor was not invited to the restaurant. Clearly, his seniors didn't want to see him, and the junior officers with whom he had the closest contact were somewhat embarrassed. Finally, one of them, as he was talking about something that had happened on the last occasion in the restaurant, told Fermor, "The reason we haven't invited you is that we all felt awkward, because you didn't drink anything but had to share the bill equally. That was very much to your disadvantage."

"For me it was *impossible*!" replied Fermor.

"Quite."

The young Fermor was not interested in banquets and didn't consider it to be either an honor or a pleasure to drink and eat in the restaurant. He even, as we have said, intended to refuse to go there, but when he sensed that he had been excluded without forgiveness, and in such a categorical way, both gently and yet irrevocably, he was taken aback and, not fully aware of the situation, he felt at a loss. "Why is all this so quick and so simple? I didn't do anything bad, but I'm being flung out like a cat by its tail. And apologies on top of that . . . It's just mockery."

But after only a few days he found the way he'd been dropped amusing.

Unfortunately, there was no more for him to take a look at. Fermor could see that he himself had been looked at very thoroughly and rejected; moreover, gossip started to circulate that he'd taken a *joke* of the treasurer's as a serious offer of a collective bribe.

That made him indignant: he went to see the treasurer and to demand an explanation; he was so furious that he nearly raised his fists.

The sneerer took cover but told people what had happened. "He's a Don Quixote. I can't imagine what's gotten into his head. He can't understand a joke and attacks people who mean no harm."

Now even if Fermor decided to assent to the general state of things and accept a share of the kitty in a fraternal way, he almost certainly would have failed to put things right with his comrades and seniors, whom he had, without exception, offended by his display of moral rectitude.

"A despicable troublemaker" was what people said about him: he heard that and found even more strength within himself to insist and not surrender.

Fortunately, every one of our seniors usually has someone even more senior above them, and Fermor hoped to find protection further up the ranks.

Among the recommendations Fermor had been supplied with on his transfer from Petersburg to Warsaw was a letter to the Russian Orthodox suffragan bishop Antoni Rafalsky, who was notorious for his strange and still unexplained part in taking over the Pochayev monastery from its Uniate monks (Rafalsky later became the metropolitan bishop of Novgorod and then of Petersburg).

Resentful, not knowing what else to do, Fermor took it into his head to use this letter and went to see the suffragan bishop, a man who, before he was widowed, had been a layman and knew how to get on with people.

There is no doubt that the bishop immediately saw what was wrong with the young man who had presented himself; he must have realized that Fermor was a fine, oversensitive child, someone quite unsuited to living with people of fighting spirit. Perhaps Antoni felt sorry for the "infant"; in addition, the Petersburg recommendation that Fermor had brought with him carried some weight in Rafalsky's eyes. The bishop valued his Petersburg connections. Consequently, the suffragan bishop thought it best to take an interest in Nikolai Fermor, so as to have on his side the person who had written about the young officer.

These were the motives, whose true sense was quite beyond the young idealist, that led the suffragan bishop to take an interest in him and use the first opportunity that came along to help him. When Antoni next met the commander of the engineers in Warsaw, General Ivan Den, he talked about Fermor and persuaded Den to look favorably on him.

General Den didn't pay particular attention to the details of the request, since he thought it a minor matter. The young officer was languishing because he wasn't immediately given a lot to do or put in charge of anything. That was not unusual: young people are always languishing about something or other and want to run before they can walk, but are not allowed to. But this was a young engineer who had studied well and was highly recommended by his college authorities . . . and he was also known to the grand duke . . . and he had the bishop asking on his behalf . . . Why in fact was he still left without any assignments, when there was so much engineering work to be done? Inquiries had to be made.

General Den asked what it was all about.

He was told that the young man was excellent and everyone was very pleased with him, that there was no intention to leave him without assignments, but, of course, he had to be "looked at" to see what he was best suited for.

"Well, yes, yes, that's quite right. Not that he was complaining to me, but the bishop, you know . . . asked on his behalf, and he is asking . . . We have to do something for him."

"We already have."

"Excellent, then," replied General Den and informed Antoni that everything had been sorted out: his protégé would be given a task that matched his abilities, "and then we shall keep an eye on him, and he will be rewarded."

Antoni immediately sent for Fermor and couldn't wait to give him the good news, but he was unpleasantly surprised by "the lack of delight" and "the amount of indifference and melancholy, as if the man was disillusioned by life."

Accordingly, the suffragan bishop gave Fermor a scolding and "advice on how to live," consisting of instructions to maintain a cheerful spirit under all circumstances.

"Don't let your spirit be extinguished, and don't let your head be bowed," the bishop instructed him. "Don't push ahead too vigorously, lest others complain, and don't lag behind, lest others wax indignant. You have to keep to the golden mean, stick to the middle, keep a watch on yourself, and not irritate your neighbor. And a word of wisdom to conclude: reproach not, that ye be not reproached, for if ye reproach others, ye too will be reproached."

None of this worried Fermor. What could anyone reproach him for? But as far as his dissatisfaction with his superiors was concerned, he sensed that he was in the wrong: his commander had in fact singled him out for the job for which he was most suited and he had no cause at all for any creeping suspicions. Fermor had been entrusted with technical checks, something involving six other officers senior in rank and intellectually more experienced than he.

This appointment was a mark of respect. It was useful work and required initiative: look, investigate,

draw conclusions, set out criticism, and report in an intelligent and comprehensible way.

Fermor went out to do his very best. However much work he was given to do, he would complete it with a report by the due date.

All his fellow officers immediately looked at him askance. For the first two weeks they let him do as he wished, but then one person said on behalf of the others, “Why are you doing this? Are you trying to get yourself noticed, then?”

Fermor’s reply was that it never even occurred to him to seek promotion over his fellow officers and, as far as he understood things, he was doing absolutely nothing to lay himself open to reproaches for ambition or underhanded actions.

“But you had plenty of time to look around, so you must see, mustn’t you, that on any report day just one project is dealt with, but you are dragging in five or six and treating each one differently.”

“I report on as many as I am given to inspect.”

“But that can’t be done, can it?”

“I have a lot of spare time, so I manage.”

“You manage an awful lot of things! You don’t drink, and you don’t play cards: but you can’t demand that everyone lives like that. If you find your free time a burden, you can take up any hobby you like, but don’t try and make your comrades look bad.”

Fermor began to feel awkward, and he presented himself to request a different job.

“What cheek! He already thinks his position isn’t good enough, and he’s asking for another one. He’s pestering the chief commander and the bishop. He’s licking everyone’s boots like a lapdog,” one officer remarked, while others added, “Look at the patrons he’s got! A recommendation from Petersburg, here he has the bishop or General Den asking favors for him. Anyone who’s given so much patronage is bound to make a career for himself.”

But Fermor suspected that the more people interceded on his behalf, the worse things got for him.

He had a letter from Petersburg, telling him that he “didn’t know how to benefit” from others’ sympathy, but he couldn’t find what he needed from this sympathy—which was not special patronage but the opportunity to work honestly and diligently.

He no longer knew whom to complain about: everyone was being nice—his commander did not tell him off or persecute him, he even made it clear that he was very pleased with Fermor’s diligence; the sneerer had stopped offering him packets wrapped in strips of paper and handed him only what was due, even saying aloud as he did so, “Please take so many rubles and kopecks.” He was no longer invited to the restaurant, but he found every day to be more oppressive and unbearable.

Bishop Antoni had not stopped taking a benevolent interest: he asked the commander how Fermor was shaping up.

The commander replied that he himself was very pleased with Fermor, but he was both surprised and sorry that Fermor had such awkward relations with all his fellow officers.

The suffragan bishop took the first opportunity to pass this on to Fermor, and inquired, “What’s the matter?”

“I’m not right for the job; I don’t fit in,” replied Fermor.

“Why not? Why do you think so badly of everything? It’s bad to have a gloomy view of life. Life for someone like you in his prime should be full of joy and interests. I was discussing you with your commander and he praises you, he says nothing at all to suggest that you don’t fit in. I’m sorry: it’s you who are creating a peculiar situation and making your comrades dislike you.”

Fermor flared up and responded, “That’s perfectly true: now the authorities treat me better than my fellow officers do.”

“Quite . . . That’s what’s bad.”

“Yes, but to make them treat me well, to make *them like me*, I’d have to do . . . what is quite wrong.”

“What can that be? Surely not become a freethinker?”

“Oh no! I don’t know of any freethinking,” replied Fermor.

“Then what is it?”

Fermor said nothing.

“I expect they’re on the take.”

“I’m not going to say anything.”

“If that’s so, it’s because engineering is like high finance: they’re both departments where everyone is on the take.”

“But why? What’s the point of it?”

The suffragan bishop looked long and hard at him, and said, “You ask why they’re on the take?”

“Yes! After all, it’s vile!”

“And so you can’t get on with them?”

“I can’t, Your Reverence, I’m quite incapable by nature of doing so.”

“Well, it doesn’t need a lot of capability.”

“A bribe . . . would burn my hand.”

“It won’t actually burn you, but . . . it’s not good. All the same you can’t allow yourself to be arrogant.”

Fermor realized that something about his clash with the sneerer had been passed on to the bishop, and he exclaimed bitterly, “Oh, Your Reverence, where’s the arrogance? They themselves are more than anyone can bear, they deliberately offend and then tell lies and make up stories.”

“Yes, but when you’re a serving officer, you have to get on with people.”

“I don’t see any way of getting on with people like that, and I shall ask to be transferred elsewhere.”

“Even elsewhere you may meet with the same thing, because there will be people there.”

“But not all people are the same, after all.”

Antoni looked at him again, this time with pity, and said, “Yes, sometimes there can be some relief.”

“I’ll take a look. I have faith that I shall come across something different.”

“Well, have faith . . . take a look.”

You could hear the weariness in the suffragan bishop’s tone.

14

Fermor’s immediate superior officer, however, turned out to be so sympathetic and well-disposed to him that he gave him a new assignment. Fermor no longer approached anyone with complaints, but he utterly failed to get down to work: he began to seek isolation, living a solitary life, not opening his door to the orderly or the postman, and muttering oddly.

Bishop Antoni learned of this and sent a messenger asking Fermor to visit him.

Fermor came, but didn’t deny the rumors that had reached the suffragan’s ears. On the contrary, he reinforced the more and more unfavorable prejudices against him. He was curt with the bishop, a man who had interceded on his behalf. When asked of the reason for his dark mood and his aversion to society, Fermor replied, “I’ve lost my faith in people and I can’t do anything.”

Antoni was unable to induce Fermor to be any more frank; he let him go, saying that Fermor, in his opinion, must be ill and needed treatment.

Fermor said nothing as he left; he locked himself up even more determinedly and then, when he was summoned to see his commanding officer a few days later, spoke to him so insolently that the commander, “wishing to save him,” went to see Bishop Antoni and told him everything that had taken place between them, adding, “If I take this any further, the young man will be ruined, because he has been saying horrible things about everybody.”

“Oh dear!”

“Yes, he’s not only breaking military discipline but—please be so kind as to forgive me—he is criticizing Your Reverence’s words of pastoral care. All the same, as you are kindly taking such an interest in him, I don’t wish to cause you any grief: I’m asking you to pay attention to him. He’s definitely ill and has to be sent off to stay with relatives, where he can rely on gentle family care and not be provoked by anything. His present state makes him impossible as a serving officer, but the grand duke is fond of him, and if you are agreeable to telling General Den this, he’ll probably write to Petersburg and persuade the grand duke to allow Fermor extended leave and money for treatment.”

Antoni agreed to intervene in the matter and soon found an opportunity to discuss it with General Den.

The general smacked his lips and shook his head.

“A pity, a great pity,” he said. “I’m quite willing to report this to the grand duke and I’m sure the poor man will be authorized to take leave and receive money, but before I decide to write about him, I’ll need a comprehensive certification of the officer’s health. I’ll send my doctor to see him and let you know what he tells me.”

The suffragan bishop informed Fermor of the sympathetic interest taken in him by the chief commander, who would be sending his own doctor to see him. This news, however, did not bring the young man any consolation: on the contrary, it upset him so much that he wrote a furious reply to the suffragan, saying that he didn’t need a doctor, and that what was being done was wholly unnecessary. What was necessary, he said, was to give him an opportunity of serving with honest people, and that was not being offered. General Den could easily have done this, but unfortunately he took a wrong view of everything, because he himself . . .

The suffragan could see that the young officer was now overstepping the line: no state could allow

things to proceed like that.

The letter remained unanswered.

15

General Den's trusted and skillful doctor was sent to see Fermor. He found him in a very gloomy mood. As soon as the doctor opened his mouth, the gloom changed to extreme irritability.

Fermor at first refused to speak, except to say that he was physically completely healthy but was in a serious mental state because he had "lost his faith in people." The doctor tried to persuade him that this lost faith could be restored if a person were to take, on the one hand, a more tolerant and, on the other, a broader view, for humanity did not consist just of those around us at any particular moment in any particular place. Fermor suddenly snapped, lost all self-control, and in a terrible rage, began to assert that there was nothing better anywhere in Russia, that there was no way an honest person could live, and it would be by far the happiest fate to die as soon as possible. In his fury, he kept grabbing and dropping a pistol lying on his table; he denounced all authorities without exception, he considered them powerless to stop the hypocrisy, the thieving, the contempt for honesty, intellect, and talent that reigned everywhere in Russia. In conclusion he stated that none of the authorities were fit for their intended purpose.

The doctor reported back to General Den with the opinion that Fermor, if not mad, was in a state very close to insanity, that not only was he not to be entrusted with service assignments but he also needed close surveillance, lest he succumb to the influence of his gloomy melancholy and put himself or others in some sort of serious danger.

"That's what I suspected."

General Den sent the doctor to inform Bishop Antoni of all this; he himself brought the matter of Nikolai Fermor to the attention of the grand duke. Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich immediately summoned Nikolai's brother, Pavel Fermor, and ordered him to travel straight to Warsaw and bring the "patient" back to Petersburg.

The order was carried out. Nikolai Fermor was brought to Petersburg and, living in his parents' house, he began treatment with a very good private doctor.

He was not found to be mad; but his nerves were definitely disturbed, he was depressed, and he was writing poetry in the style of Eduard Guber,[12] then famous for his gloom. In conversation, Fermor gave sane answers to any questions, except those to do with the service and with honesty. Anything even touching on those subjects immediately undid his state of calm and led to explosions of fury in which he passionately expressed his grief at losing faith in humanity and his utter despair of anyone ever helping him to restore it again.

When anyone mentioned powerful personages, he responded, "It makes no difference: nobody means anything; nobody will do what needs to be done. They are all there, but when it is necessary for them to mean what they are supposed to mean, they mean nothing, and that means that nothing means anything."

After that he started "rambling," which testified to his mental disturbance, what you can call his "point of insanity." Soon Fermor's breakdown was the subject of society gossip. Fermor's strange mental illness interested and intrigued a lot of people. Again, it was thought he must be hiding something political, and people were reluctant to believe that there was nothing of the sort. He himself said, "What I know is not political, it's just foul, and that's what hurts me and oppresses me."

Fermor's mental sufferings, it is said, gave Alexander Herzen the outline for his *Doctor Krupov's Notes*, and later served Feofil Tolstoy, who used Fermor as a source for his study *Diseases of the Will*. Feofil Tolstoy's hero is a precise copy of Nikolai Fermor, but the reflections are taken from *Doctor Krupov's Notes*, which had appeared earlier.

To judge by the dates of these events and the great similarity between what we read in *Doctor Krupov's Notes* and particularly in Feofil Tolstoy's *Diseases of the Will* and the character of the wretched Nikolai Fermor himself, it is very plausible that both Herzen and Tolstoy used Nikolai Fermor's story for their studies: Herzen with more talent and originality, Tolstoy more slavishly and conventionally reproducing reality as he saw it.

16

Nikolai Fermor spent several years in a state that might be called neither one thing nor the other. At times he felt a little better, then he would suffer melancholy and anxiety again, would leave the house and return at strange times, lose his temper over trifles, and ignore matters of major importance. But what generally made him lose all control was dishonesty, even the slightest: he would not let anyone get away with any unjust or ignoble treatment he witnessed of another human being. But if nobody irritated him, he was quiet and either walked about pensively or sat with his gaze lowered like Abadonna,[13] reading the poems of Eduard Guber.

This situation might well have carried on unchanged for many years had something exceptional not occurred, as was often the case in the reign of Nicholas I—a testimony, even today, to the relatively simple way things were done then.

One day, Pavel Fermor was setting off with his regiment to Petergof for the summer: he invited his sick brother to accompany him. Nikolai agreed, and the brothers settled in the same tent in camp.

At the time Nikolai was going through a quiet period: he read, went for walks, and could converse calmly, as long as nobody touched on his sore point—honesty and the authorities. But the dominant topic in Petergof was careers and it was impossible to escape frequent conversations about someone's success and the reason for another man's failure. The patient listened to all this and began to get irritated again; he was afflicted with insomnia, which had such a bad effect on him that he began hallucinating and telling his brother, Pavel, all sorts of things that made no sense. But as Nikolai nevertheless remained quiet and presented no danger to anyone, nobody kept a close watch on him and he could leave whenever he wanted and go wherever he fancied.

It was in this particular mood that he left the house very early one morning and set off for a walk in the Lower Park. That year, Emperor Nicholas was drinking the mineral waters there and also getting up very early to walk straight from the Alexander Palace along the Lower Park's main avenue.

It so happened that the Emperor and the sick Nikolai Fermor crossed paths.

17

When he saw the Emperor, Nikolai stood still, as etiquette demanded, and saluted.

The Emperor looked at him and was about to pass on, but then, probably having trouble recalling which engineering officer this was and why he was here, turned around and waved a finger to summon Fermor to his presence.

Fermor approached.

"Who are you?" asked the Emperor.

Fermor gave his name.

"Why are you here?"

Fermor replied that he had been serving in Warsaw, but had unluckily fallen ill there and, on His Majesty's orders, had been brought here to Petersburg by his brother, Pavel, but that he was now with his brother enjoying the fresh air in camp and recovering.

The Emperor took a close look at Fermor's face and then asked, "Weren't you in the College of Engineering when I was still grand duke?"

"No, Your Majesty, that was my brother."

"What's wrong with you now?"

Fermor was at a loss for words; his face instantly took on an agonized expression. The Emperor noticed and tried to encourage him. "Tell me the truth! Whatever it might be, *I* must be told the truth!"

"Your Majesty," replied Fermor, "I never lie to anyone, and I shall give you nothing but the truth: my illness is a loss of faith in people."

"What does that mean?" the Emperor demanded, raising his voice and throwing his head back.

Fermor calmly repeated the same words, saying that he had lost faith in people. He then added that this had made life unbearable for him. "Your Imperial Majesty, nobody believes me, but I am suffering horribly."

"I believe you. I know that Warsaw is the cause of your troubles; but that's of no importance. Here you will breathe Russian air and recover."

"Out of the question, Your Majesty."

"Why not?"

"It's impossible to serve honestly." Fermor's face took on a pathetic, oppressed expression.

The Emperor was apparently moved by the suffering that filled Fermor's being. He wasn't in the least angry and touched Fermor on the shoulder, saying, "Calm down. I'll give you a job where you will be

able to fear nobody and to serve honestly."

"But who is going to protect me?"

"I shall."

Fermor turned pale. He said nothing, but his left cheek twitched convulsively.

"Or don't you trust me?"

"I trust you, Your Majesty, but you can't do what you have so magnanimously promised to do."

"Why not?"

Fermor's excitement and perturbation had now reached such an extreme that a spasm struck his throat and tears poured from his eyes. His whole body was trembling, and he replied with in a distraught voice, "Sorry, forgive me, Your Majesty. I don't know why, but you cannot . . . you won't . . . protect me."

18

The Emperor looked at Fermor with pity; this was, of course, the moment he became convinced he was talking to a madman. "Did you have treatment in Warsaw when you fell ill?"

"General Den sent his own doctor to see me."

"Well, then, couldn't he do anything for you?"

"I'm beyond any help, because I have lost . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted the Emperor, "you've lost your faith in people. But don't feel awkward about it: that's partly what I suffer from, too . . ."

"Your Majesty, given your position, that is even more terrible!"

"What can we do, friend? But I put up with it. I'd advise you to seek comfort in religion. Do you pray to God?"

"I do."

"We do have clerics who are very famous: you should turn to one of them."

"In Warsaw I had attention from His Reverence Bishop Antoni."

"Yes, he's eloquent. Given your state, religion can be of some comfort. But you must know Ignati Brianchaninov: he was a fellow student of yours."

"He was a fellow student of my elder brother, Pavel."

"That makes no difference: I'll introduce you. Go straight back to camp and tell your brother that I order him to take you immediately, in my name, to Saint Sergius Hermitage to see Father Ignati. He can do you a lot of good."

Fermor said nothing.

The Emperor went on his way, but then stopped a second time. He approached the sick man, who had not moved an inch and said, "Go on, then, go! Go, don't hang about . . . And if there's anything you need, ask. I'm ready to help you."

"Your Majesty," Fermor replied, "the reason I'm not moving is not that I want any greater favors from you but because I am so full of emotions that I can't move. I thank you for your sympathy, and I don't need any more." Tears were streaming down Fermor's cheeks.

The Emperor took out his handkerchief, wiped Fermor's face, and kissed him on the forehead.

Fermor was breathing heavily and staggering, but his gaze was now animated and cheerful.

"You're an unusual man, my friend. If you need anything else, then remember, I give you the right to contact me directly at any time."

"Your Imperial Majesty, I thank you most humbly, but I shall never do that."

"Why not?"

"Your Majesty, you have so many important and sacred duties that my fate as an individual is not worth your even thinking about. That would be sacrilegious. I shall not allow myself to bother you."

"I like you. If you refuse to come and see me, write to me and hand your letter to the adjutant general to pass to the court. I shall be glad to help you. Who is treating you at the moment?"

"Dr. Geratsky."

"He's no good: I'll recommend you to Mandt. Goodbye."

19

When Nikolai Fermor got back to camp after his meeting and conversation with the Emperor, his elder

brother, Pavel, was still asleep. Nikolai woke him up and started telling him about his encounter with the Emperor in the Lower Park and the outcome of their conversation, reproducing every single word of that conversation.

Pavel thought that his brother had completely lost his mind at last, that everything Nikolai saw and heard was a hallucination; but when he made inquiries, he found out that Nikolai had been telling nothing but the truth. At the very least, the special persons who had to witness everything had actually seen the Emperor meet Fermor in the Lower Park, talk to him for a considerable time, go back to him twice, wipe Fermor's face with his own handkerchief, and kiss him on the forehead.

As for all the rest, the patient's word had to be taken, and the authorities had to be notified accordingly.

Pavel's battalion commander at the time was Ferré. He was the first person to whom Pavel reported, telling him what had happened and how, and then asking his commander to clarify what should be done next. Was the matter to be left without further action, by attributing it to Nikolai Fermor's sick imagination, or should the reports be believed and the Emperor's orders carried out exactly as they had been reported?

Ferré's opinion was that in this case, even if Nikolai Fermor was considered to be a sick man and probably hallucinating, he was, to judge by all appearances, telling the truth, and therefore the Emperor's orders, as transmitted through Fermor, had to be carried out.

Pavel Fermor then took a carriage, seated his sick brother in it, and took him to Saint Sergius Hermitage.

20

When they arrived at Saint Sergius Hermitage, Pavel Fermor found that Brianchaninov was officiating in church, celebrating a liturgy. Only after church when he stopped at home on his way to the refectory was Brianchaninov informed that the Fermor brothers had come to see him on the Tsar's instructions.

Ignati Brianchaninov received the brothers in his chambers; Chikhachiov, the uncle of Pavel Fermor's wife, was also present. Their conversation was brief because they had to join the other monks in the refectory. Conversations are not allowed at mealtimes in the monastery, but afterward, until the bell tolled for vespers, they talked about everything they could remember. Then the officers were due to return to camp.

Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov's meeting with Nikolai Fermor, the man who had lost his faith in people, did nothing at all to restore that lost faith: it only filled him with a mighty nervous weariness that kept making him yawn and fall asleep. Pavel, on the other hand, found new problems arising, one after the other, in dealing with the Emperor's concern for his brother.

They had only just approached the camp when Pavel was told that people had been searching for him for some time.

"But I couldn't be in the camp because I was taking my brother to Saint Sergius on the Emperor's orders. I reported this to my battalion commander."

"That makes no difference," came the answer. "The search too was on the Emperor's orders, and the battalion commander hasn't said a word. Go quickly to your tent: there's an important letter for you there."

It turned out that the greatest medical celebrity of his time, Dr. Mandt, was in the camp in person. He had come there to see Nikolai Fermor on the Emperor's personal orders and was very displeased to find the patient was not there. He had in fact left a letter, saying that today he was summoned as a matter of urgency by the Emperor who had seen fit to entrust him with the care of Nikolai Fermor, and in view of that he, Dr. Mandt, asked Pavel Fermor *as soon as he got back to camp, whatever the time might be, to come and see him immediately* and give a personal explanation.

It was now rather late, but Pavel Fermor set off at once to Dr. Mandt's apartment in the city.

21

Dr. Mandt was at home. He was sitting on the veranda, smoking. When Pavel Fermor's arrival was announced, Mandt received him immediately and, still puffing at his cigar, said, "The Emperor has taken a great interest in your brother. His Majesty is of the opinion that he must have a tendency to

melancholy. What do you know about your brother's morbidity?"

Pavel told the doctor everything that he knew, but Mandt considered this too little to form a clear idea of the case; to make a report to the Emperor, he needed to have a "history of the disease" written by a medic, and all that should be available to be passed to the Emperor the next morning.

Fortunately, Pavel did have a history of the disease, written by the doctor treating his brother, but he'd left it at his town apartment in Petersburg, and in those days it was not so easy to communicate between Petergof and Petersburg.

To make things easier, Mandt issued Pavel with a ticket for the state steamboat leaving for Petersburg in the morning: thus Mandt was in possession of Nikolai Fermor's history in good time. He read it as soon as he received it, understood everything, and reported to the Emperor the same day.

The Emperor was pleased that his orders had been carried out so quickly and so precisely. He thanked Dr. Mandt and asked him to take a close, sympathetic interest in the unhappy young man's lamentable condition.

"His ravings," said the Emperor, "are so full of sincere noble principles that it wouldn't be a bad idea if people who enjoy full health could have something similar."

Mandt shook the hand that the Emperor then offered him as if he were accepting from that hand his patient Nikolai Fermor and the latter's lost faith in people.

The whole Fermor family was delighted; they all blessed the Emperor for his attention and began to look at the future with new hope.

In society, people also said, "Now Mandt will bust a gut and cure him. Otherwise, hell's bells, all their learning isn't worth a penny."

Nikolai Fermor himself, however, said nothing and took an impassive view of everything done to him. None of it seemed to mean anything to him. If it was Mandt, so what? He didn't care who would help him lose the last drops of his faith in people. He seemed to have exhausted his energy and sensitivity during that morning conversation with the Emperor, and whatever followed was something that didn't concern him in the least.

He wasn't interested in how and where Mandt was going to treat him, nor in the methods. His attitude to the whole business was that of a person for whom all this fuss was unimportant and its results meaningless, because he himself knew the most reliable means to rid himself of the burden of his wretched mood.

22

The measures described above were all the diligence the famous doctor would show in carrying out a task personally entrusted to him by the Emperor. Dr. Mandt only tried to visit the patient once, unsuccessfully, since he found that Fermor was not in his tent at the Petergof camp. As we said, the next day Mandt quickly perused the patient's history and reported to the Emperor without visiting the patient. Even then, he never once visited Fermor, but merely sent his assistant, Dr. N. F. Zdekauer, who would later also become a famous name. If the Emperor asked whether Mandt had seen Fermor, Mandt would answer that he had "seen" him: to avoid lying, he immediately summoned the patient to his apartment.

For a patient in Nikolai Fermor's state, such a summons was easy to fulfill; every time he was called upon, Fermor immediately went to Mandt's apartment (on the Moika Canal, not far from the Police Bridge, in the Belikov Building).

A whole year passed like this: things might have continued, were it not that in early spring Nikolai Fermor once again took a walk and was spotted by Emperor Nicholas. This chance meeting sparked a change that sent the course of affairs off in a new direction.

The Emperor encountered Nikolai Fermor on the corner of Nevsky Prospect and Bolshaya Morskaya Street, right by the English department store.

As Fermor passed, he noticed the Emperor approaching, put his hand to his cap in a salute, and stopped.

The Emperor looked at him and recognized him right away. "Fermor?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"How is your health now?"

"I don't feel the slightest improvement, Your Majesty."

The Emperor's face expressed disapproval. "What is Mandt doing for you, then?"

"He sometimes sends Zdekauer to see me, and sometimes summons me to see him."

"Well, and what do you do when you come to see him?"

“First of all, I wait a long time in his waiting room, and then, when he comes out, he blows cigar smoke into my face and tells me to drink bitter water.”[14]

“Is that all?”

“That’s all, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor’s face darkened, and Fermor took advantage of this brief conversation to remind the Emperor that he had granted permission to address any requests to him personally.

“Well, fine. What can I do for you?”

“Order some kind Russian doctor to treat me.”

“Very well,” replied the Emperor and moved on with a nod of his head.

23

The Emperor did not forget his promise this time, either. Before Fermor opened his door, he found a “courier” from the court waiting for him; the courier had been sent by Mandt demanding that the patient immediately present himself to the famous doctor.

Without the slightest reflection, Nikolai Fermor set off.

This time Mandt did not keep him in the waiting room for long. “Did you complain to the Emperor about me?” he asked, confronting Fermor severely.

“I didn’t complain. The Emperor deigned to ask how you were treating me, and I replied that you treated me with nothing but an order to drink bitter water. I always speak the truth.”

“Yes, yes, you and your truth . . . But did you ask the Emperor to pass you to another doctor?”

“I did. I thought that, given your position, you don’t have time to deal with me, so I asked His Majesty to allow me to consult another doctor.”

“The Emperor has satisfied your request. As you wish, you’ve been assigned a different doctor. Go to Mikhailov Square, the Zherbin Building, where the chief doctor of Empress Maria’s Institutions lives. The Emperor has entrusted you to him, and I’ve already handed over the history of your illness.”

In the family memoirs I have used to compile this essay, the name of the doctor who replaced Dr. Mandt in this story is not mentioned. Although his treatment methods were no more successful than Mandt’s, his consultation system differed from Mandt’s in that it was far more decisive.

The new doctor did not keep Fermor lingering in his waiting room, nor did he send an assistant to Fermor’s house. He considered it essential to make the symptoms of illness the subject of a more fundamental and more unrelenting observation, and the most convenient way of doing this seemed to be to put the patient in the hospital for the mentally ill just out of town, “at the seventh kilometer.”

Fermor’s relatives were badly shocked by this measure. In their opinion, and that of all their acquaintances, there certainly seemed to be no need to deprive the unhappy Nikolai Fermor of the freedom and family joys he experienced in a domestic setting.

But the doctor was unbending in his opinion. He considered it essential to remove the patient from his domestic setting and attributed all previous failures of treatment to the fact that the patient had not been removed from his home and had not been under constant observation.

It was, however, impossible to object or argue. This was the only way the doctor could envisage to start treatment and, if the patient’s relatives resisted, he promised to report them to the Emperor.

Some people saw this as a necessity; others suspected the doctor of wanting above all to protect himself from a repetition of such chance events as the one that led to Nikolai Fermor’s transferal from Dr. Mandt. There were grounds for such suspicions. While Nikolai Fermor stayed with his family and was free to leave the house and walk around the city in military uniform, he might once more chance to meet the Emperor, which would provoke further disturbances, whereas if he was removed to the seventh kilometer the possibility of such a meeting was excluded and everyone could feel much easier.

Either Mandt lacked the courage to suggest such a measure or it never occurred to him, but when it was prescribed by his colleague of Russian extraction, he supported it as a completely appropriate measure, the best way to observe the patient thoroughly.

The Emperor was convinced by the opinion of these famous doctors, but even now he did not deprive Fermor of his own guardianship. He ordered Fermor to be taken to the seventh kilometer, but also instructed his doctor “to visit the patient as often as possible and *no less than once a week to report in person about the state of his health*.”

This turn of events made the new doctor’s situation incomparably more difficult than Mandt’s had been.

24

On the one hand, the patient's relatives were relieved that Nikolai Fermor would not be neglected, as all the other patients unfortunate enough to end up at the seventh kilometer had been; on the other hand, the ingenious doctor was faced with an utterly unforeseen and very serious unpleasant situation, which was not what he had wanted. He was hoisted on his own petard. Two or three times a week he had to go to the hospital "of all who suffer," which he found worrying and unprofitable, and then he had to report once a week to the Emperor and give a tiresome, monotonous account, since there were no changes in the patient's condition: repeating the same thing to the Emperor a week later was not at all pleasant.

Moreover, the Emperor might well be angered, and that would have bad consequences for the doctor's career.

The presence of a guest like Nikolai Fermor was no cause for joy at the seventh kilometer, either: he may have been off his head, but he still had his understanding and, when he saw the cruel methods then used in madhouses, he would intercede for those he considered were being abused.

There is no doubt that in the seventh kilometer hospital, as in other similar institutions, people used their power over patients to commit abuses.

Fermor saw all this and, if the Emperor were suddenly to express a desire to visit (which, given the Emperor's character and habits, was considered very possible), then the indefatigable lover of truth could cause a great deal of trouble; in fact, he was already doing so.

He had to be gotten rid of completely: medical politics had no lack of resources in order to do so.

25

Although the doctor observing Nikolai Fermor suffered failure at his first steps, he maintained his diplomatic skills: he reported to the Emperor that a new private clinic for the mentally ill had been opened in Berlin under the management of a famous psychiatrist, and that they were getting amazing cures as a result.

"Well, then?" exclaimed the Emperor. "Let's send Fermor there, at my expense."

That was just what the doctors most wanted: they were thoroughly fed up with the fuss over Fermor.

"Only I order," added the Emperor, "that the patient be sent there in the most comfortable way. People will be held responsible for his safety."

The most energetic measures were immediately taken to carry out this order.

The best way of reaching Berlin at the time was by steamship leaving Petersburg for Stettin: that was the usual route for going abroad. Of all the steamships working this route, the most convenient and comfortable was considered to be the steamboat *Alexander*. This was the ship that those of high society chose: all the places for the spring sailings of the *Alexander* were usually reserved for distinguished persons. It was decided to send Nikolai Fermor with a traveling companion on this ship's first spring sailing.

Nikolai's brother, Pavel Fermor, whom we have had cause to mention several times in this tale, was unable to accompany the patient to Stettin. His service kept him in the Petergof camp, and Nikolai was entrusted to the care of a fellow officer, Stepanov, who was handed both the patient and the money for his expenses, with detailed instructions on how to accompany the patient and protect him from any dangers on the journey. Stepanov was to settle Fermor in Berlin, in accordance with the Emperor's will and orders.

Handing the care of Nikolai Fermor to a third party must without doubt be regarded as proof that the patient was by now definitely classified as insane, but the fact that he was still given a place on the best steamship, primarily used by distinguished persons, shows how much was done to look after this patient who enjoyed the Emperor's favor.

There was no better procedure than to report to the Emperor how carefully and conscientiously his will had been done.

The steamship was taking a select group of people, among whom some especially distinguished persons stood out: Vorontsov, the former governor-general of Novorossiysk, with his family; Secret Counselor[15] Bek; and many other persons of both sexes who held prominent positions and had a great deal of influence in the highest ranks of society at the time.

26

It was a fine day, full of the joys of life. Fermor, preparing to sail, was in a very calm, philosophical mood.

The wall of his room in the house at the seventh kilometer still bore an inscription, the maxim of Hippocrates: “Quod medicamenta non sanant, ferrum sanat; quod ferrum non sanat, ignis sanat; quod ignis non sanat, mors sanat” (What medicines don’t cure, iron cures; what iron doesn’t cure, fire cures; what fire doesn’t cure, death cures).

Whoever took such a liking to this maxim, and took the trouble to copy it out on the wall of his sad dwelling place, probably had a grim view of life.

Fermor felt no joy at his departure abroad, nor would he miss what he was leaving behind in his homeland. He was glad of the prospect of a cure for his melancholy, but to judge by appearances, he had no faith at all in the possibility of a cure.

This prejudice, in his doctors’ opinions, was what ruined the whole business. But the patient had his own arguments to the contrary: he considered that it was impossible to recover one’s faith in people if people didn’t instill it in one.

The patient was accompanied by his brother as far as the port of Kronstadt, where they had a moving final farewell. But Pavel Fermor’s grief at being separated was greatly relieved by the general sympathy for his sick brother shown by the other passengers.

As soon as these respected persons learned, during their transfer to Kronstadt, that they were being accompanied by the Fermor to whom the Emperor was showing fatherly attention, they all tried to outdo one another in revealing their warmest, most intimate concern for Nikolai Fermor. What did he need his brother for? Everyone on board would be a loving relative for him.

“After all, we’re all Russian, all children of the same Tsar and brothers in faith.”

Secret Counselor Bek even cited the Old Church Slavonic Scripture passage exhorting us to care for a man and take him in our arms. Even if the young man had no particularly interesting personal qualities, the very fact that the Emperor knew him personally and that His Majesty had taken him under his wing would have been more than enough to make everyone feel it their duty to forget themselves and take care of him.

It would seem that there was no better way of sending a patient away than the manner in which Nikolai Fermor was sent. Thoroughly reassured, Pavel Fermor returned to his regiment in the Petergof camp. Two days after taking leave of his brother, Pavel went to see their aunt who was then spending the summer in her country house near Saint Sergius Hermitage. There he soon received unexpected news of the superb care his brother had received on the steamboat.

27

While Pavel Fermor was sitting with his aunt, three uhlan officers dropped in on their way back from a parade that had taken place that day at Krasnoye Selo. One of them, Karl Pillar von Pilchau, began telling the company that the parade had been disappointing.

“Whose fault was that?” asked the aunt.

“Nobody’s, but the Emperor came in a bad mood, so he didn’t show much gratitude.”

“But what could have upset the Emperor before the parade?”

Pillar von Pilchau shrugged and said, “At the worst possible time, just before he left for the parade, he was given some sad news.”

“What about?”

“About something unpleasant that had happened to an engineer, Second Lieutenant Fermor. The Emperor had taken an interest in him, and His Majesty was terribly upset by Fermor’s death.”

It was only at that instant that the aunt realized that she had made a serious blunder: she had thought that the cavalrymen who had arrived were friends of Pavel Fermor, so she had not bothered to introduce them.

She now hastily did so, but too late: the awful effect of Pillar von Pilchau’s words on Pavel Fermor was beyond repair.

Pavel, however, got a grip on himself and said that he was strong enough to listen to the whole story. He asked for just one favor: to be told as quickly as possible the exact nature of the sad news about his brother. “I need to know quickly so I can hurry and put right whatever can be put right.”

“Unfortunately,” replied Pillar von Pilchau, “it’s all over, and there’s nothing that can be put right. If

you are as firm as any self-respecting man should be, then I will tell you that your brother has perished irrevocably."

"How, where, what happened?"

"He threw himself overboard and drowned in the sea. This happened near the island of Bornholm."

It was then that Hippocrates's maxim, written on the wall at the seventh kilometer, came to mind: "Quod medicamenta non sanant . . . mors sanat."

Loss of faith in people had been cured by death.

28

The brief news that "Nikolai Fermor threw himself overboard and drowned in the sea" was sufficient for the authorities, but it was not enough for the victim's relatives and friends. They wanted to know how this tragic event could have happened, given the thorough oversight and loving care with which the patient had been sent off.

Two versions exist of what happened.

When Mr. Stepanov, who had taken responsibility for looking after Nikolai Fermor, returned from abroad, he gave the following account to Pavel Fermor. The accident happened shortly after lunch. The weather was fine and after the meal all the passengers came out on deck to have coffee. Of all the distinguished passengers, only two or three stayed behind: they didn't want coffee after the meal and preferred to have an afternoon nap. Nikolai Fermor was one of the passengers who came out on deck. He was in a calm mood and had eaten well.

The passengers formed groups as they drank their coffee, and the general conversation was lively. Nikolai Fermor was drinking coffee, sitting next to several persons; when he finished his coffee, he put the cup on the deckhouse, stood up, and walked to the edge of the deck, then instantly, in front of all the passengers, put a foot on a crossbeam and threw himself over the railings and into the water.

Everyone was overcome by unspeakable horror: a terrible chaotic scene arose and nothing made any sense. In this confusion, before the captain was found and summoned up onto deck, and before the steamship could be stopped and the ship's lifeboat lowered, Nikolai Fermor surfaced and began flailing his arms, keeping his head above the waves. But once the lifeboat began to get near him, he lost his strength, or decided not to be rescued, and sank to the bottom.

It was now impossible to save him. To the passengers' indescribable horror, the steamship resumed its course for Stettin.

29

The other version, which I happened to hear from Vice Admiral A. V. Freigang, a man remarkable for his sincerity and sense of justice, wholly contradicts the version given above and presents events in a different light.

According to this second version, Nikolai Fermor's death was even simpler and less quirky. True, everyone at lunch was very animated, busy with the new acquaintances they were making on board. Nikolai Fermor drank nothing; he was calm, but only he could know what sort of calmness this was.

When lunch was over, Fermor left the dining room before any of the others, and nobody saw him after this. A cup of coffee was in fact poured for him and left on the deckhouse, but the coffee was untouched, so it cannot be said for certain who put it there, Fermor or the waiter handing it around. At first nobody realized that Fermor was missing, until Secret Counselor Bek, who had gone for a nap ("to consult Morpheus"), happened to emerge from his cabin onto the deck, refreshed himself with a yawn, and inquired, "Where is our . . . what's his name . . . the one who's traveling on the Emperor's orders?"

That was when people started looking around in all directions and saw that Fermor wasn't there. Even so, nobody rushed to assume that he might have perished in the waves: they thought he had just vanished somewhere on board, so that they raised a hue and cry, running in search of him everywhere a man might, or even might not, hide. The search proved utterly futile, and only when every nook, cranny, and mousehole had been inspected, did the captain first make the horrible assumption that Fermor was not on board.

"Where has he got to? There's nothing around except water and sky."

Someone distinguished for his logical turn of mind had a thought that summed it all up. He said, "If he

hasn't been raised to heaven for his love of truth, then, it would seem, he's drowned in the abyss of the sea."

To the shame of humanity, this cynical joke relieved the grim impression affecting many of the passengers. People were horrified, but not very much, and the horror was more evident toward nightfall, when the ladies began imagining they could see "a head rising up" from the waves.

To be rid of this hallucination, everyone made haste for the lights of their cabins, and the next morning the secret counselor was already advising people to see what had happened the previous day as an indication of "our young people's attitude to life and their inability to value others' kindness."

Of course, it is impossible to conflate these two versions and draw any general conclusion, but I don't know which of them should be given preference if we are to consider justice. In the summer of 1887 a young lady threw herself into the sea and drowned, and *nobody* noticed: the ship belonged to a shipping company in Riga, and it had the same name as the steamship from which Nikolai Fermor jumped to his death. Several identical cases are on record. Consequently, there is nothing impossible in the second version of this story, in which Nikolai Fermor found it very easy to hide his intentions and rid himself of his joyless life, given the great animation of passengers occupied with new, interesting acquaintances.

30

In Saint Sergius Hermitage *this* second version was known; it probably had greater credence than the first version. Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were both upset by the sudden death of a young man who had shared their education and their urge to carry over into his life the kingdom of truth and impartiality. The monks considered Fermor's suicide to be a great crime committed by all the Russians on board that ship. In the monks' opinion, these gentleman could have spoken less about their sympathy for the poor man whom their Emperor had taken under his wing and done more to look after him.

But it was all over. The monks held a requiem for the man who had perished, a martyr to his exhausting desires to serve honestly, a longing that could not be realized in those times; the simple monk Chikhachiov lowered his head as he sang with his amazing basso profundo, "I weep and I sob."

This was how three pupils of the Russian College of Engineering, men driven by a passion for truthfulness, withdrew from life. None of them was suited to the service for which all three had been educated. The first two, who kept to the rule "Depart from evil and do good," retreated to a monastery, where one wore a bishop's miter before he died and the other remained an ordinary monk. But the third man who wanted to fight and test his strength against evil in life buried himself in the abyss of the sea.

1887

Translated by Donald Rayfield

THE INNOCENT PRUDENTIUS

A Legend

i

IN THE first centuries of Christianity two merchants, Alcaeus and Hyphas, lived in a trading village on the shores of the Mediterranean. They went to sea in a small boat, which would today be called a sloop. They traded as partners and sometimes, also as partners, boarded small ships, which they robbed. Alcaeus and Hyphas concealed this second activity, piracy, but it was more profitable than trading. The joint enterprise made both merchants rich: they lived well. They had the very best houses in the village, and their houses had gardens and hot baths.

Hyphas was older than Alcaeus; he had a wife, Euphrosyne, who was, like him, getting on in years, and a son, Prudentius. Alcaeus was ten years younger than Hyphas and had recently married a young and very beautiful, kind, and intelligent girl called Melita.

Melita was the niece of Euphrosyne, Hyphas's wife, and was just as close a friend to her as Hyphas was to Alcaeus, while Hyphas's son, the attractive youth Prudentius, was the favorite of both families, his own and Alcaeus's. Prudentius was equally at home in either house, enjoying the care of his mother, Euphrosyne, and the beneficial guidance of Alcaeus's wife, the young and beautiful Greek Melita.

Whenever their joint enterprise required, Alcaeus and Hyphas would sail off to sea for long periods. Then their wives, the middle-aged Euphrosyne and the young Melita, were in charge of the houses and spent their free time together, after physical labor and the necessary housework.

Euphrosyne was very much a homemaker, having been brought up in the old pagan ways, and was concerned only with the things of this life: she could not read or write, but she was better than Melita at smoking meat, preserving fruit, and salting fish. Melita had come here from a city, where she had spent time studying and doing genteel work that demanded artistic taste. That was why Euphrosyne periodically had to give Melita useful advice and help around the house, while Melita, out of gratitude, tried to repay Euphrosyne by helping in any way she could. She embroidered head scarves for Euphrosyne and made patterned braids for the ethereally light tunics in which Euphrosyne liked to dress her only and long-awaited child, the youth Prudentius, who was distinctly remarkable for his fine figure and beauty.

Prudentius was well built and dark-skinned, his smooth complexion glowing warmly, with big black eyes under black eyelashes, black eyebrows, and thick, hazelnut-colored curls.

He was very gentle and nimble in his movements, and he was shy, passionate, and modest, which was why everyone found him agreeable and likable.

The most useful thing that Melita could do for Euphrosyne was to instruct Prudentius in literacy and in those arts that Melita knew to be suitable for a male child, given the way that people lived then.

II

Melita taught Prudentius to read and write, to sing and play the panpipes, to run fast, and to throw metal disks and rings at a target.

Hyphas and Alcaeus had spent their lives in a village that was half savage, more a pirate settlement than a trading one: they were ignorant of any such elegant pastimes. Their strength came directly from harsh struggles with the sea. But Euphrosyne was pleased that Prudentius was being brought up more gently and more in accord with the fashions of the time.

As a competitor in his exercises to develop strength and deftness, Prudentius had a personal teacher, the beautiful Melita, and her young black Phoenician slave girl, Marema, who was called Marmé for short.

When Melita first began bringing up Prudentius he was only twelve years old, but he was so well developed and well built that he was more like a boy of fifteen. At the time Melita was seventeen and so young looking that she could have been taken for a nubile fifteen-year-old. Her contented yet restrained way of life and her moderation in all pleasures, as well as freedom from childbearing, had kept her body young, so that any stranger who met her would probably assume she was a girl, not the young wife of a middle-aged man like her cross-eyed, coarse-mannered husband, Alcaeus.

Her lively sharp mind was just as virginal, pure, carefree, and happy-go-lucky: it fit her kind heart and fine, firm, even temper.

By teaching Prudentius how to run races, the fleet-footed Melita became his equal; when they raced she often overtook him and reached the opposite mark first, where she would stop and face him, her subtle fingers rearranging her fine black locks, strewn over the dewdrops of sweat on her white forehead.

They went on throwing pieces of metal, disks and rings, while the dark-faced slave girl Marmé acted as the referee: Marmé was treated not as an obsequious servant but as a loving girlfriend. Melita liked her fine nature and good looks: Marmé had a beautiful figure and her smooth skin was like shining agate.

Melita was busy with Prudentius for all of two years. At the end of the third year, however, these people were struck by catastrophe.

III

Alcaeus and Hyphas spent several stormy days at sea, but Alcaeus returned alone in the sloop.

This happened in the evening when all the inhabitants of the village were asleep.

Alcaeus entered his house; Marema opened the door and took fright when she noticed the expression of terror on her master's face. Alcaeus immediately ordered the servant girl to go away; he went straight to his wife and told her that Hyphas had drowned at sea.

The news both shocked and surprised Melita. She had some idea of what seafaring was like; she began questioning her husband. How could the ship have remained undamaged and Alcaeus safe from harm, yet Hyphas perished?

"What happened," replied Alcaeus, "was that two pirate sloops attacked us: we fought them off for a long time; I hit harder and managed to defend myself, but Hyphas couldn't duck a blow on the head, and he fell in the water with his skull smashed to pieces."

"But how did you manage to survive?"

"I could see that it was impossible for me to fight back on my own, so I threw myself into the water to make them think I was dead too. When I was in the water I grabbed hold of the keel and held on until the pirates finished looting our boat and left it to drift in the wind. Then I clambered back on board, raised what was left of the sails, took the helm, and somehow got back to our shore."

Melita heard her husband out and made no further inquiries, but Alcaeus could tell by her face that she seemed to doubt his story. Averting his gaze from hers, he added, "I can't tell you now the details of how this happened, and you wouldn't be able to understand it all, because this is something quite different from your music or your embroidery. Instead, I'll ask you to give me the help I need to make an extremely difficult task easier for me."

"No need to ask, please. I'm ready to do anything I can," replied Melita.

Then Alcaeus confessed to her that he, a man totally fearless when battling with the sea or with pirates, was very afraid of the sight of a woman's grief or the sound of wails and screams, so that he was asking Melita to go and see Euphrosyne and break the horrible news of her husband's death and the loss of a major part of their fortune, which had been in the boat.

Melita said that she would do this. She let Marmé ensure that the bathhouse was heated for her husband, while she got dressed and quietly went to see the widow Euphrosyne.

When the widow Euphrosyne heard from Melita the sad news of Hyphas's death, she wept and wailed uncontrollably, as one might expect, and then put on widow's weeds and covered her head with an unhemmed head scarf before telling Melita, "I won't be able to sleep tonight, so I'll take my son in my arms and we will weep until morning for Hyphas. In the morning I'll have Prudentius go around the whole village and ask everyone to come to the seashore where my husband, Hyphas, embarked for the last time with Alcaeus. Meanwhile, you tell Alcaeus to come there at the same time and tell everybody how it happened that my husband perished but Alcaeus came back alive. I am so shocked that I can't make sense of anything by myself, and I haven't got the strength to think of what to do about the boat, which Hyphas had a half share in, because Alcaeus owns only the other half. So let everyone in the village gather and hear the sad story that Alcaeus will tell us, and then let the people discuss how we are to go on and what the best way is for us to settle up and share out the property with Alcaeus."

Melita thought that the widow Euphrosyne's wishes were well-founded; when she got home, she informed Alcaeus of them. He took the news calmly, as a man whose conscience was clear and who had nothing to fear from publicly recounting what had happened.

He thanked his wife for taking upon herself the heavy burden of breaking the bad news to the widow Euphrosyne, then he fell fast asleep in Melita's embraces. But his deep sleep was several times

interrupted by moments of agitation, and Alcaeus's sleepy voice whispered the name of Prudentius into Melita's ear.

IV

The villagers gathered by the jetty and sat down, some on the yellow sand, others on gray stones, while the widow Euphrosyne was seated on an overturned boat with her handsome son, the innocent Prudentius, sitting right by her feet. Both mother and son were barefoot, wearing unhemmed mourning clothes.

Alcaeus stood in the middle of the circle formed by the people who sat in front of the overturned boat on which Euphrosyne had taken her place. He recounted what had happened, that unknown persons had attacked them at sea, overcome them, and robbed them of their goods, killing Hyphas and throwing him into the sea.

In short, Alcaeus told the people what he had told his wife, and the account left people with the same mixed impression it had made on Melita. When Alcaeus finished speaking, all the men remained silent for a while, and then one of them, the elder of the village, spoke: "In my opinion one meets all sorts of people at sea, and what happened to Hyphas cannot now be put right: so we have to think of the widow Euphrosyne and the boy, Prudentius, his son, who are alive and whom we all see before us, barefoot and in unhemmed mourning clothes. Now that he is in the kingdom of shades, let Hyphas not be upset by our decisions about them and their inheritance, which we cannot divide without offending either Alcaeus or the son of Hyphas. Let everything that they held in common remain joint property until the boy Prudentius reaches a man's age; then he and Alcaeus can share it out themselves, the boat and the goods that they have temporarily stored at distant harbors."

A quiet murmur ran through the crowd: "Yes, that's the best thing to do. We all agree, so be it—as long as the widow Euphrosyne assents."

The widow, sitting with her head bowed, replied, "I'm too distressed to speak. I rely on the general opinion."

Then everyone decided that Alcaeus should take Prudentius into his business and teach him the trade and everything to do with seafaring; then, when Prudentius reached his majority, Alcaeus should share everything that he and Hyphas had earned, and in the future they would be bound to add to these earnings.

The only objection came from the widow Euphrosyne, who remarked that her son was still far too young to entrust to the sea and leave to the mercy of all its dangers; but Prudentius, as soon as he heard this, began to beg his mother to let him join Alcaeus, so the widow Euphrosyne gave her consent. Alcaeus had no reason not to accept Prudentius. He offered him his hand and said, "I swear by the gods that I am glad the people have decided to make you my partner in your father's stead. And to you, Euphrosyne, madam, I promise in front of everybody and before heaven that I shall always remember how dear your only son is to you, and I shall spare and protect his youthful strength. You should have no fear: the sea is not always cruel—often it even saves man from evil, especially at the youthful age that Prudentius is about to enter. Sea and fresh air will make his muscles strong and his spirit bold and, what is just as precious, will keep him intact, safe from the early temptations of love that weaken body and soul. And he is going to see many foreign wonders; he will be discerning about people, he will acquire a knowledge of trade, and it will give you joy to see wealth coming back to your house, thanks to him, and when he has free time and sits by your fireside and you turn the smoking pieces of meat over the coals, you yourself will enjoy listening to Prudentius telling you about it all."

V

Euphrosyne made no more objections, and Prudentius went off to sea with Alcaeus, after which seafaring became his constant occupation, and it made him so strong that at fifteen he was like a seventeen-year-old, and at seventeen he looked like an adult: he was amazingly handsome, yet at the same time bashful and completely chaste.

Alcaeus did not benefit from nurturing Prudentius, and he secretly would have been happy to be rid of him, so as to keep secret all his routes and the places where he had accumulated goods in foreign ports. But Alcaeus didn't want Prudentius to disappear the same way as Hyphas had, because if the same

incident recurred, this might arouse suspicion, and the judgment of the simple fishermen of his native village might be harsher than Alcaeus could endure. But Alcaeus did all he possibly could to corrupt Prudentius's soul: when they came to foreign ports, Alcaeus encouraged him to drink wine and left him in the company of seductive women, to whom he promised a good reward if they could relieve Prudentius of his modesty and inveigle him into vice and sensuality. It was all, however, in vain: a guardian angel protected the youth so closely from all the temptations and impulses to which his age made him vulnerable that even the temptresses to whom Alcaeus entrusted the chaste youth started to call him "the Innocent Prudentius."

But why, given his youth and the good looks that impressed so many women, was he so immune to any of their temptations?

Women became infatuated with Prudentius to the point of insanity: once, when he and Alcaeus happened to dock at the jetty near the town of Knida, the most beautiful girl of that town, hiding behind a rock, threw a sharp piece of bronze at Prudentius. She missed his head but wounded him so badly in the shoulder that he fell, covered in blood. She then threw herself into the sea.

The wound that the crazed girl of Knida inflicted was very serious and took so long to heal that Alcaeus brought Prudentius home to the widow Euphrosyne. He was ill, bandaged, and when the whole village heard of the accident, many of them recalled what had happened to Hyphas, which gave rise to bad talk about Alcaeus.

Talk of this kind spread quickly, and the dark-faced slave girl Marema was the first to hear of it. As we said, Marema was young and, in her way, also very beautiful, and she was very fond of Melita.

"Madam," she said when she and Melita were in the bathhouse, "there are strange rumors going around. It's my duty to warn you that they don't concern the widow Euphrosyne's son alone; a lot of it affects you and your husband, my master Alcaeus."

"What is it, then?"

"It's this: everyone knows that the handsome Prudentius is now at the height of his good looks and good health, but all the same he is still as innocent as a child . . ."

"That may well be so, but it has nothing to do with me, does it, and I don't think I need to know . . ."

"You're wrong. You do need to know, madam."

"I can assure you, my overeager Marema, that this is absolutely no concern of mine and I'm not even the least bit interested."

"It should interest you!"

"Why?"

"Surely you must understand!"

"I don't understand, and I'll tell you frankly that I find this quite unpleasant. Why should I want to be informed about Prudentius's behavior? Why are you all trying so hard to make me aware of all this?"

"What you mean by 'all,' madam?"

"The widow Euphrosyne, for example."

"Aha, she would, wouldn't she? But madam, who else has been talking to you about the life that Hyphas's bashful son is leading?"

"Just imagine: it was my husband, Alcaeus, who told me."

"Alcaeus?"

"Yes."

"He has his reasons too."

"He didn't tell me what they were."

"I can see why."

"Well, I can't see anything at all," replied Melita, and then immediately added with a kindly smile, "If Marmé knows more than her mistress, then it's because there's something that concerns Marmé more than it does Melita."

"Oh, it's quite the opposite," replied Marema, also smiling. "It's not me, but you, madam, for whom the innocent Prudentius carries a torch."

"What are you saying? Come to your senses. How could you say such a thing, Marema?"

"I only told you what was obvious to me, and what is just as I said. And believe me, madam, I'm not the only one who thinks so."

"Who else dares to think so?"

"Dares! You're trying to be funny. Why should it need daring to say so? Anyone, even if they don't want to, has to think about something that is as strikingly obvious as the innocent Prudentius's infatuation with you."

"That's slander on all of us, Marmé, and I'd like you to get it out of your head and never ever start

talking to me like that again."

"You can forbid me to talk, and I'll obey you, but 'get it out of my head'? No, you're asking me to do something impossible! Anyway, if I'm going to stop talking, I can't tell you of all the dangers . . ."

"To whom?"

"To whom? That's an odd question! To everybody dear to you: to Alcaeus, to Marema, to the widow Euphrosyne, and to the innocent Prudentius, who cannot go on living much longer without a dramatic change in his heart, unless something turns up to distract his thoughts and take them far away from everything that has been boiled down to the sweet sound of your name. Madam! Either you are a child yourself, despite being married to Alcaeus for so many years, or you're the biggest and cleverest actress in the world! Can't you see that when he looks at you in that way, it's obvious to everyone that he can never stop thinking about you?"

"I don't see that."

"You don't, but I do, and so does his mother, the widow Euphrosyne, in the house where he sleeps with his head on her knees, while his lips quietly whisper as he dreams the sweetest word, 'Melita.' The widow Euphrosyne is a woman, after all, and she can't help realizing what this means. I think that if your husband fell asleep with his head on your knees and started whispering some other woman's name, even if the name were as insignificant as Marema's, you would guess that my master was calling on me for more than the services I am obliged to provide when you are present and watching."

"Honestly, I never think about that."

"I believe you! And why would you, when your heart has never been the least touched by passion?"

"What are you trying to say?" Melita interrupted. "Or do you think I don't love my husband?"

"No, you love Alcaeus as a husband, and that's sufficient for a married woman. But there's a good reason why Alcaeus has wandering eyes. Why did he tell you about the bashfulness of a young man who is inflamed with his first passion for you? Oh, I wasn't there when you were talking about it, but I can detect the insinuations in Alcaeus's voice; I am certain that he was joking to conceal his poisonous suspicions."

"Alcaeus told me all about it and he really was laughing."

"And you took that laughter to be a sign of cheerfulness! Do you believe that he was joking?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Oh, this is ridiculous! It has kept you safe from a greater danger, but that danger will still come, and I can see a dark fire in the way your husband's squinting pupils flicker. So I beg you, not as your slave but as a friend whose whole happiness is inextricably linked with your life, take off your blindfold, have a close look at what has happened, be brave, like a woman who understands the danger. Then let's consider what we should do to avert disaster."

"What sort of disaster are you expecting, Marema?"

"The same sort as what ended Hyphas's life."

"Oh, just heavens! Surely, Marmé, you don't suspect too . . ."

"Calm down, calm down, madam. I no more suspect than I want you to sell me to break rocks in a quarry, but I'm pointing out to you the red sky on the horizon and the sound of an approaching storm. Be cautious . . . don't betray your thoughts to Alcaeus with a sound or a look."

"But I have nothing to hide . . . I used to instruct Prudentius—true, out of friendship with the widow Euphrosyne, and at the time I was affectionate with him, as with a child, but I've never whispered any sweet nothings to him, never looked at him more lovingly than friendship requires, and I am sure that if the widow Euphrosyne were to ask Prudentius, he wouldn't tell her he was guilty of the feelings you've just told me about . . . When I next meet him, I'll tell him to stop thinking about me, that I find it tiresome . . . offensive . . . and . . . if everything you've been saying is true, then he would be wasting the best years of his life."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"You're a woman, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm a woman . . . but what does that imply?"

Marema smiled and said, still smiling, "We all have sensitive hearts . . . and you're so compassionate . . ."

"Well, I'm sorry for him."

Marema waved her hand dismissively and replied curtly, "Oh, madam! That's all it needs: being sorry for a man throws us into his arms!"

VI

Melita paused before she responded to Marema's last words: probably she felt that there was a grain of truth in them, but then she took control of her feelings and said, "There are a lot of dangerous things in this world: feeling sorry can lead us to do something bad, but I'm not afraid of that."

"So someone's cast a spell on you, have they?"

Now Melita smiled and answered, "Yes!"

"What are the magic charms protecting you?"

"I'm a Christian. I'm incapable of deceit and I know there isn't and can't be any happiness in lying."

"Of course not, of course not! But supposing the gods of Hades were to summon my master . . ."

"You're saying these things to me again, Marmé! What a shameless mood you're in!"

"No. You tell me what your mood would be if you found yourself free, a young widow . . . when you have the affection and passion of a youth as handsome as Prudentius, would it seem to you as it does at the moment? Oh, I'm sure that you'd waste no time going to burn your heart as a sacrifice at the altar of Hymen."

"Never."

"Why not, madam?"

"First of all, because I'm a Christian."

"I'm very bad at telling the difference between faiths. As far as I'm concerned, all religions are the same in one way: they all stop people loving the way they'd like to!"

But these words upset Melita so badly that she started to tell Marmé off even more harshly for having such licentious ideas.

"You tell me about the friendly feelings you have for me," said Melita, "but you come out with thoughts that could only suit a devious troublemaker who wants to divert a married woman from the paths of duty. That, I hope, is something that will never happen to me: that is what holy doctrines will save me from, and I shall try to find the meaning of life by studying them. Don't smile, Marmé. Christian doctrines reveal to us what the meaning of life is and teach us to control our passions. You've told me several times that I've made your life much easier by treating you as my equal, not as a slave girl. The reason for that, after all, is that our Teacher told us to see a brother in every person, and so I find sweet joy in calling you my 'sister' and making sure you have no worries and lack nothing. But our concord has to stop now, because you consider you have the right to take from life whatever you can grab, and I take a different view."

"Of course, grab everything one can!" Marema interrupted. "Why let your happiness slip away?"

"Happiness! That's a vague word, Marema. Who can say what happiness is? For you it might be getting what you want at the moment, but for . . . another woman . . ."

"You mean, for a Christian woman?"

"Perhaps I do. For her the greatest joy is not immediately extracting from life everything it can give but quietly aiming for whatever can create joy for everyone."

Marmé laughed, waved her hands dismissively, then said, "Oh, oh! Those are old songs! The reason you think like that is because your love for your husband is too calm, and you haven't had any children by him. If Alcaeus were capable of arousing warmer feelings in you, or if you had children, then, believe me, you'd take a different view of everything and start to long for your *own* happiness, not for everybody else's."

Marmé told Melita in vivacious terms what an enlivening experience was the happiness of being loved by someone whom you loved, and how natural it was to be concerned for your children. She made this concern seem something so warm that it could not be compared with the bland happiness of loving all the people of the world without distinction.

But Melita wouldn't budge: she objected again that she didn't need to have any special feelings for people who were merely related to her by blood, and that it was far more desirable for her to have good feelings *for all people*, as was taught in the doctrine that had made her a Christian. Then Marmé smiled, shrugged her swarthy shoulders, and said, "I can see our argument is getting us nowhere. Let's leave it all to time. For now, just remember what I've been telling you: your husband is jealous of you and the son of the widow Euphrosyne, and you need to know this and sweep aside anything that can make these worries worse."

"Make the worries worse? There's no cause for worry! It's a worry that I'm not in any way guilty of causing, yet I'm supposed to be afraid of it! And all you people call that life! No, life is totally different, and I'm not going to stop seeking it where I ought to."

"Seek on!" Marmé replied, to end the conversation. "But it would be even better to be prepared to deal

with what life can throw in your path when you least expect it."

"So be it, then. I've been patient and listened to everything you've told me in the goodness of your heart, and now I'm going to be stricter in guarding my own feelings."

VII

This conversation with Marmé had cut Melita to the quick; it made her think again about things that she had hitherto never dwelled on. Given her lively young temperament and the purity of her thoughts, she was utterly unable to concede that Prudentius, five years younger and always treated by her as a sweet child, might now be inflamed, without her noticing, with an irrepressibly passionate love that, given their position, could not possibly lead to anything. And now she was told that this had nevertheless happened . . . Melita hadn't noticed anything before, but now, after Marmé had pointed things out, she began to recall the innocent Prudentius's deep sighs and his prolonged looks fixed on her, forgetting about everything around, and sometimes failing to hear his mother or other people calling him.

Reluctantly, Melita began to believe that she had unfortunately aroused a passion in the youth and that, if it didn't pass, it was possible that Prudentius would refuse outright to marry and his mother's house would then remain empty and the widow Euphrosyne would start to reproach Melita for stealing her son's affection, something she wasn't in the least guilty of.

In fact, the widow Euphrosyne had already begun to look at Melita with different eyes and when, after the conversation we have described, Alcaeus and Prudentius set off for a long sea journey, the widow Euphrosyne stopped concealing her dissatisfaction with Melita. Once she told her, "I must say, you've withered my child's heart."

"God!" replied Melita. "Surely you, Euphrosyne, can't suspect that it would give me any pleasure to affect your son's mind."

"I don't believe what anyone says, but I can see for myself that he's in torment, and I am too, for his sake."

"But what can I do to stop those torments?"

Euphrosyne shook her head, wrinkled her brow, and said, "Yes, I know you can't do anything to help him, but . . . all the same, Melita, I'm suffering, and find the sight of you hard to bear."

At that point Euphrosyne left, and Melita went back home, utterly dismayed by this fateful conjunction of circumstances but unable to find herself at fault. She hadn't lured Prudentius into the nets of her beauty. She also examined her own feelings for the young Prudentius and fully convinced herself that she was not singling out Prudentius in any way. She liked him and she was sorry for him, but no more than for many others for whom she was prepared to do any favor within her power and whose joy she could be pleased by. But she refused to be unfaithful to her husband for anyone in the world. Infidelity could not be a means to console the widow Euphrosyne.

Reflecting in this manner, Melita constantly imagined that in life—if you wanted to live as you should—you had to have discord and battles with many people, and in such a situation there would be no peace or happiness. Was it worth involving yourself in such battles just so as to grab a little more than others had of something pleasant? All that would be only for a very short time, after all, and life passed quickly. No, it wasn't worth it. It was incomparably better to live battling with oneself: you had to chastise yourself, free yourself from passions that distracted you from mercy and love of mankind . . . Melita began to recall one of her childhood girlfriends, the fair-haired Erminia, who was the most elegant and beautiful of her contemporaries, but chose the harshest fate for herself: she aligned her spirit with the "Galilean doctrine" they had heard of, to such a point that she felt it was not at all worth bothering about her own personal happiness, and she renounced marriage and went off to a community in Lydda to nurse the sick.

The moral example given by Erminia and the serious steps taken for the life she had chosen were now constantly in sad Melita's thoughts, and they reconciled her with life. She contemplated various paths she could follow, and found that all these paths involved conducting battles for everything and with everyone, and the only path that was bearable and peaceful was one not crowded by people trying to get on it, one where you didn't have to knock anyone down in order to get possession of someone else's share of life's so-called joys. That path was the path of the "Galilean prophet" and of those who believed in the truth of his teaching. That was what Melita preferred to everything that she had. It was a path of renunciation of personal joy, a path of life devoted to the good of others.

And when Melita's thoughts ran through everything she could imagine in life, they ended with what the girlfriend she recalled had chosen. She always felt that inwardly she had found peace and calm, she

was afraid of nothing and looked boldly ahead, believing that only in this frame of mind could a person come near to the true purpose of his or her incarnation.

Had it been possible for any changes to occur in Melita's life, and had such changes depended on her choice, then she would not have preferred a short-term love with her heart's chosen object above all other things. She would have arisen straightaway and gone to see her friend Erminia and would have shared in her work helping bedridden old men and abandoned children in Lydda, or in some other locality where people were also fighting one another in search of personal happiness and neglecting those who had lost their strength and had been crippled in that horrible struggle.

If it were anywhere possible to sacrifice oneself like this and relieve human grief and lay the foundations for a new path in life, Melita would have arisen and gone there . . . then she would never be parted from that perfect joy that she could already sense, but which in her present position was marred by an insuperable fear that some accident or other would suddenly occur, and jeopardize the mood of certainty she had chosen, and begin to fill her soul with anxiety, fear, and suspicions.

Oh, those suspicions! Melita knew what they could do to you: when Hyphas was still alive, she couldn't help once hearing a conversation he and Alcaeus had about a small island where there was a cave only they knew about and where they hid their treasures and their criminal secrets. Ever since then, Melita had always suspected that they were not just partners in trade but also robbers and murderers. And that had become a source of unending fear and torment for Melita. Ever since, she had suspected that everyone else in the village thought Hyphas and her husband were pirates. Hyphas's death and the communal decision to bring Prudentius into the business confirmed Melita's suspicions even more that everyone knew the criminal nature of Alcaeus's life and nobody cared, simply because they themselves, as far as morality was concerned, differed little from Alcaeus and Hyphas. Now, of course, the innocent Prudentius's life would follow the same disgraceful path. Alcaeus would naturally behave in Prudentius's presence exactly as he had done in Hyphas's, and doubtless Prudentius now knew that they had somewhere in a group of rocks close to the shore an island with a cave . . . and that there was treasure there and something else Melita had only a vague idea of. She had never asked her husband about this secret and never talked to Marema about her speculations, because Melita felt ashamed to admit that she suspected her husband of piracy, while Marema . . . Oh, Marema, despite her devotion to Melita, was far nearer in spirit to those whose actions and passions horrified Melita so much.

The reason Melita's suffering was even more terrible was that she had nobody to help her relieve her mind: she would suddenly begin to feel depressed and languid, as if she could sense some imminent new grief. All this Melita had to conceal, and she did so, to think quietly to herself or to weep without fearing petty remarks about it being "shameful to be so downcast." Melita began to make frequent excursions to the rocky seashore and sit there for a long time, her arms around her knees, looking into the infinite distance, from which she seemed to be summoning some final temptation to act out on the stage. It was not slow in coming.

VIII

Once, when Melita was sitting at the seashore on the cliff she was so fond of, a boat emerged from the distant outcrop of dark rocks: all its sails were furled, except for one old sail that could barely move it along. Instead of a flag at the top of the mast, there was a black felt hood.

If Melita hadn't been so deeply absorbed in her own thoughts, which were leading her to a desire to make an abrupt change in her life, then she would have been bound to notice this boat, and its mourning rigging would have told her that some great misfortune had happened aboard. But Melita saw the boat, its dirty sail, and the black felt hood on its mast, yet thought nothing of it.

She should have also noticed that the boat, which had, of course, been at sea for some time, was coming to land at a strange time and not making directly for the village but deliberately passing between the rocks and making landfall near one of them by tying a cable to a part of the cliff that stuck out like a horn.

Someone dressed in brown cloth got off the boat; he took nothing with him and disappeared somewhere along the shore. Then, an hour or more later, he came back to the boat along with a woman who was wrapped from head to toe, and who, the moment she stepped aboard, shrieked horribly and thrust aside the man accompanying her, then fell in the sea, but immediately swam to shore and ran away.

Melita did notice this, because the woman's shriek was too loud and terrible to ignore, but she lost sight of this figure immediately and she was then more struck when shortly afterward the same figure, in

the same wet dress but with Marema's face, ran up to her, fell down, her fists clenched, and howled through her tears: "O my poor mistress! Curse me, sell me to some cruel master for being the bringer of bad news! I deserve it for the grief it's my fate to tell you of."

Marema's very first words filled Melita's heart with a premonition of the most cruel misery, and she told her, "I beg you, tell me quickly what's happened, and don't be afraid I'll be angry: my faith doesn't allow for anger."

"Yes," replied Marema, "now the time has come for you to show your poor, ignorant slave how much light and strength your faith can give!"

"I'll do my best to see I don't give you a bad idea of my faith. Tell me what I need to know."

"Your husband . . . over there, you see, by the cliff . . . that's his boat . . . my master Alcaeus's, and . . . in it, at the bottom, by the mast that has a black hood on top, covered with a sail . . . lies the body of a man no longer breathing."

"Prudentius!" Melita exclaimed loudly, and immediately started wringing her hands above her head, repeating as she sobbed, "Poor child! Could Alcaeus really have killed him out of jealousy? Oh, the unlucky innocent Prudentius!"

Marema let Melita weep for a while and somehow get a grip on her grief, then she took her hands and placed them on her own heart, before saying, "No, Melita. You don't need to weep for the youth; you need to direct your grief elsewhere. It's not Prudentius who's perished, but the man whose death makes you a widow."

Melita suddenly held back her tears and stared at Marema with dry, fiery eyes.

"Has my husband, Alcaeus, died?"

"Yes, madam."

"And is it his body down there by the cliff?"

"Yes, it's in the boat . . . Alcaeus's body . . . I've seen it and I curse fate for making me the person who brings news of it."

"Stop talking about cursing; take me right now to the boat."

Marema put Melita's hand on her own shoulder; both women walked hastily to the sea and were soon by the boat, which had no cargo except for a carelessly thrown sail at the bottom of the mast.

"Here it is," Marema said quietly, then said with concern, "if you can bear to see it and give the order to unwrap it."

Instead of replying, Melita bent down herself; she just lifted a corner of the blue-edged gray canvas and caught sight of Alcaeus's face with its prominent squinting eyes and with three horrible wounds in the skull. The wounds were in the center of the crown, each one was roundish, the size of a cherry, and they were each a finger's distance apart. She didn't need to feel them to know that they were all equally deep and fatal.

Melita bent over her husband's head and looked into his eyes for some time; then, when she lifted her face, she saw the innocent Prudentius standing right in front of her on the other side of the sail. Prudentius's garments were as sad as his face.

When she saw his frank face, which still bore the traces of chastity and spiritual purity, Melita sighed and quietly asked, "I suppose you know what people are going to say about you when they see Alcaeus's wretched body?"

"Yes, I know," replied Prudentius. "People will say that it was me who inflicted the wounds that killed Alcaeus."

"Then what is your answer going to be when you defend yourself? I for one don't know how good you are at lying. Or perhaps the reason you brought Alcaeus's body here was to confess to everyone that you committed murder and to tell them why."

"No," the innocent Prudentius told her. "I haven't brought Alcaeus's body here so as to spin lies or confess over the corpse to murder. The reason I brought him was for you to see your husband, even if he was dead, and to let you mourn and bury him, as a wife. When I'm asked about Alcaeus's death, I'll tell the whole truth about it without any lies."

As she listened to this, Melita looked Prudentius in the eye; her gaze was sharp and hard, and she felt in the depths of her mind she had unconditional proof that Prudentius was in no way guilty of Alcaeus's death.

That gave her joy, and her heart was at ease, as far as it could be in such circumstances.

"If you're right," she replied, "then hurry and make your explanation known. I and Marema will stay here by Alcaeus's corpse. But you have to go as fast as you can to the village, call your mother, the widow Euphrosyne, and summon everyone, young and old, to the seashore, to the place where Alcaeus told the crowd how your father, Hyphas, met his end. Marema and I will bring the corpse by boat, and

you can all break up branches to lift and carry Alcaeus's body, and when it's been lifted out, you have to tell everyone how Alcaeus came to die and who inflicted those three symmetrical wounds on him."

Prudentius quietly nodded, and soon after he had reached the village, he took the bugle that hung on a branch of an old oak and blew three blasts on it so that everyone quickly gathered for a meeting.

IX

When they heard the bugle, people instantly started emerging from their houses and, adjusting their clothing, began making for the place where they had all so recently listened to Alcaeus's tale about the death of Hyphas. Here, once again, an old boat was beached, keel upward, on the sand.

All this was half an arrow's flight from the old oak under which Prudentius now stood. He stayed there until almost every adult in the village had gathered around the boat, and from the other side of the sloping cape another boat appeared: Melita and Marema were rowing hard.

Prudentius had waited for this boat to appear at sea; he was the first to notice it, and he immediately took from the tree the bugle, which hung by a twisted piece of bast; he blew it so hard that it emitted not only the usual call sound but also a special signal that had a secret meaning for the bugler's friends or kin.

The people gathered on the shore did not fail to notice this signal. One said, "Prudentius must have something special he wants to say."

"Why do you think that?"

"He's signaling somebody with the sacred bugle."

"He's summoning his mother here."

"Oh, yes! Look, she's coming out, the widow Euphrosyne."

"Does that mean they haven't seen each other yet?"

"It must."

"Odd! Of course Prudentius wants his mother to be here to hear why he's summoning the whole village, but what does he want to say?"

"We'll soon hear."

"Of course we will. There's a boat making for the shore out there . . . Aha! That's Alcaeus's boat, I know it. It's less than a year since he fitted it out, and Hyphas painted it quite recently, but now . . . Look, what's happening? Two women are rowing it . . . Hey, it's Melita and her slave girl, Marema from Sidonia . . . Well, the slave girl has bronze arms, but the women can't land anywhere near here. It's a sticky marsh and there are sharp stones below in various places, at various depths. Aha, Prudentius has thought about it in good time: he's run down to the sea and gone into the water . . . Well, he'll get a little wet, but he's got the boat in tow and is going to pull it into the shore . . . Look how he's bending under the weight of the cable!"

"But what a fine figure of a man!"

"Yes, everyone knows Prudentius is a handsome man without a blemish. Say what you like, our village has good reason to be proud of him, and I think that if the gods didn't envy beautiful mortals, we wouldn't be able to understand or explain why they would let Melita be conjoined to that squinting Alcaeus and then leave her barren, when she should have been joined with Prudentius."

"Aha! That's true."

"Yes . . . then we could have guaranteed that Melita wouldn't be so unhappy and wouldn't have stayed barren, and human eyes would have the joy of seeing the most beautiful child."

"Yes, I also think that if Melita were a little younger and free, she wouldn't have thought it too much trouble to accept Prudentius's caresses, and then, you're right, a second Cupid could have been born somewhere in our backwoods village. But Melita is a bit older than Prudentius, and her husband, that squinting Alcaeus, is going to live a long time: all his ancestors reached a ripe old age."

But at that moment Prudentius's voice rang out; he was standing by the boat that he had brought to shore: "Honorable people, and you, my much loved mother, the widow Euphrosyne. Only very recently two men sailed off from here: my father, the bold Hyphas, and the fearless Alcaeus. They set off like that many times together, and they always came back together, but the last time things happened differently: that time only the bold Alcaeus came back and revealed here, at this place, to all of you and to me, Hyphas's son, and to my father's widow, Euphrosyne, that my father had fallen victim to the sea."

The people listened to this introduction to things they all knew about; fraught, they looked at Prudentius, and at Melita and Marema still standing in the boat. Words came from the crowd: "What is he trying to say? Why are Melita and her servant standing in the boat? Perhaps Prudentius has found out

something and has now decided to accuse Alcaeus of a crime?"

But Prudentius unexpectedly burst into sobs, exclaiming as he sobbed, "Now look what's happened to the fearless Alcaeus himself!"

Prudentius shifted the sail lying on the bottom of the boat, lifted up Alcaeus's body, and added, "Here is Alcaeus! He's been killed. Come closer and look: there are three identical wounds in a row on the crown of his head. Each one is enough to cause certain death, yet Alcaeus received three wounds and all in the same instant."

"Where, how could he have got them?" the crowd on the shore started crying out; some people were wading into the water.

"You have to explain everything," others shouted.

"Yes, you are answerable for him."

"And you may be suspected: you wanted vengeance on him for Hyphas!"

"Or you envied him his incomparably beautiful Melita."

"Oh, take hold of yourselves," exclaimed Prudentius. "You can wait to insult me with your accusations until I've explained to you how it all happened. The fact is that Alcaeus and my father, Hyphas, who went ahead of him to the kingdom of the shades, were not just traders, they were . . . they also attacked other vessels, robbed them, and sank them . . ."

This was no shock to most of those listening: it didn't even, apparently, surprise anyone, except for Melita, who shrieked, "My husband was a pirate!" and raised her arms, before collapsing on Marema's shoulder.

Prudentius went on speaking, and told the crowd that he didn't believe Alcaeus's account of Hyphas's death, that it had almost certainly happened somewhat differently, but he had never thought of taking vengeance on Alcaeus, and that Alcaeus had gotten his wounds from nails that were treacherously hammered into a Byzantine trireme sailing nearby, under which Alcaeus had dived in order to clamber quietly on board and strangle the sleepy helmsman, and then throw the other sleeping crew members into the sea. But the trireme was an accursed trap for them: when they came across it before dawn, the crew was only pretending to be asleep: actually, they were wide awake. Sharp spikes had been stuck into the bottom of the trireme, and three of them immediately penetrated Alcaeus's crown, so that the white crest of the next wave instantly turned completely red with Alcaeus's blood.

Prudentius then gave an account of the Byzantine Greeks pretending to be asleep on the trireme, but bursting out with loud malicious laughter and pushing Alcaeus's body away with a pole, before sailing off to sea, while the orphaned Prudentius was left alone. With great difficulty, he fished out Alcaeus's body, dragged it aboard, and brought it here, so that everyone could see he had no need to hide anything about this unfortunate incident, which put an end to the trading partnership of their two houses.

Prudentius ended by saying, "Someone said that I am a suspect! All right then, judge me! I'm not afraid of anything, I'm prepared to die, but I am innocent of Alcaeus's death."

The people heard all this and were left in doubt: there was a conflict of opinion. Some felt that Prudentius really was innocent of Alcaeus's death; others thought that Alcaeus had died at the hands of Prudentius, as vengeance for his father or, perhaps, out of love for Melita. Then it was decided to put Alcaeus's body back in the boat and make Prudentius get in too; accompanying the corpse and the suspect, two young men and two senior villagers would take them to a prophetess who lived on a distant island. There the senior villagers would question the prophetess over Alcaeus's head as to whether Prudentius was guilty of his death. And if the clairvoyant virgin said that Prudentius was guilty, then the old men would offer her thanks, get back into the boat with Prudentius, and, once they were far enough out to sea to lose sight of the shore, the old men would order the youths to wrap Prudentius in the sail along with Alcaeus's corpse, bundle them up with rope, and throw both into the sea.

X

The widow Euphrosyne's terrible weeping when she heard this decision is beyond description. She was not the only one weeping: other women groaned with her, because many of them pitied the innocent Prudentius. Marema also moaned and tore her hair, but Melita did not moan or tear her hair or her clothes—she just turned pale and stood there for a long time, silent. Then, once the boat carrying Alcaeus's body and Prudentius, accompanied by two old men and two youths, had floated off the shore, Melita turned to Euphrosyne and told her, "Our yells and tears won't help; instead of tiring ourselves out here, let's get into the other boat and follow them. Perhaps when the prophetess sees you, a grieving mother, she'll let herself be persuaded and she'll give the old men an answer that will make people

recognize Prudentius's innocence."

Euphrosyne readily agreed to this, and a very short time after the boat bearing Alcaeus's body vanished from sight, another boat, which Melita hired from the mute Tromedes, left the harbor. Tromedes himself was at the helm, and Euphrosyne, Melita, and her faithful Marema were its passengers.

Only forty-eight hours passed before the evening of the third day, when the inhabitants of the village saw both boats coming back: the mute Tromedes's boat came ahead of the sloop that used to belong to Alcaeus and Hyphas. The young Prudentius was sitting between Euphrosyne and Melita in the first boat, navigated by Tromedes, with Marema at the sails.

People on the shore could clearly see Euphrosyne energetically trying to persuade her son of something, while he listened to her joyfully and pressed her hands in his with obvious happiness; Melita was sitting pensively, her hand trailing over the side, holding a sedge plant whose leaves played as they split the waves. Both the young men and the old men in Alcaeus's boat were calm: all of them were wearing crowns of white chamomile as a sign that their heads were free from any burdensome grim thought, and the mast had a green olive branch instead of a black felt cowl over it.

It was clear that the clairvoyant virgin had declared Prudentius innocent and that Alcaeus's corpse, no longer needed for any investigation, had been lowered into the sea. Now everyone was coming home, calm and peaceful.

Everyone guessed that they were about to enjoy a cheerful, joyful evening, that the widow Euphrosyne would almost certainly spare no expense, would stoke up the hearth in her house and entertain everyone as generously as she could. In fact, she would spare no expense to celebrate the happy day her son was saved.

And so it happened: the boats tied up, the young men and old men declared that Prudentius was innocent, and said that another most miraculous thing had happened as well. When the widow Euphrosyne and Melita tried to lift up Prudentius who was lying at the prophetess's feet, the clairvoyant virgin suddenly seemed to awake: her face lit up with a smile and she took Melita's and Prudentius's hands, placed one within the other . . .

At this point everyone listening clapped their hands and started singing, "Evoe, evoe!" embracing and kissing both Melita and Prudentius, congratulating the widow Euphrosyne and expressing their joy that the union of Melita and Prudentius would complete their happiness and settle any question of sharing property, because from now on it didn't matter what was Prudentius's and what was Melita's. As they drank the wine Euphrosyne provided and caught the smell of the meat and fish roasting on skewers and the sweet steam of damson sauce boiling in enormous vessels, everyone, without a word being said, began to feel they had a right to regard Prudentius and Melita as a married couple whose union had been decided by fate itself, and now required only a short time for the marriage to be recognized as solemnized.

The innocent Prudentius was at the peak of happiness and emphasized even more his invariable, respectful modesty in Melita's presence. The widow Euphrosyne was so happy that she didn't know what to say, and couldn't stop welcoming everybody and showing her affection to all who gathered around her hearth to take meat, fish, and broth. Marema, too, was in joyful spirits: she was helping Euphrosyne to serve the guests, carrying jugs of wine on her shoulder and filling their chalices. Only Melita remained pensive as before and did not respond to any hints, as if she was drifting about somewhere very far away. When the guests noticed signs of daybreak in the sky and began to depart, Melita shuddered and, looking at the familiar faces of Marema and the widow Euphrosyne, said, "Oh, whoever you may be, take me away somewhere quiet!"

This appeal to Marema and Euphrosyne, as if they were strangers, astounded both women: they exchanged glances, wondering if Melita had been so thirsty that she had accidentally drunk unwatered wine, whether she had lost her reason when she made the sea crossing by boat, or whether the air had cooled too quickly.

Marema checked Melita's hands; feeling that they were too cold, she wrapped Melita's head and body in the widow Euphrosyne's shawl and, putting an arm around Melita's body, led her off home.

When she was seeing Melita home and putting her to bed, Marema was certain that her mistress had been affected by the number of mixed feelings of which the dominant and most powerful one was love for the handsome and innocent Prudentius. That was why, meaning to tell Melita whatever would give most joy and be most likely to rouse her, Marema covered Melita with a blanket, bent down to her ear, kissed her forehead, and whispered to her, "Sleep, and dream of the man to whom your heart, now it's free of your vows, is lovingly drawn."

When Melita did not respond, Marema stood up straight and gently asked her, "Tell me, you're not angry because I let myself a little into your thoughts?"

"No," replied Melita, "I'm not angry."

"So I guessed right . . ."

"No, it doesn't mean that you guessed right. I'm not angry with you, because I mustn't be angry with anyone, but I am actually troubled at heart, and in fact my heart is becoming fuller with love every day, but this isn't love for the man you think I love . . ."

"What, do you mean there's someone else as well as Prudentius? Surely Prudentius will oust anyone else from Melita's heart, won't he?"

But Melita replied, "Calm down, Marema. Both you and the innocent Prudentius have their places in Melita's heart . . ."

"Oh, I'm not talking about myself!" Marema interrupted.

"Let me finish. Both of you are alive in my heart and always will be, because I love you both, just as I strive and want to love everybody in the whole world. None of you need fight for a place in my heart, but as for *possessing* it, *dictating* to my heart, and *ruling* it with the power of authority, then only one man . . ."

"But who is he? Do I know him, or not?"

Melita smiled at her gently and said, "You do, and you don't."

"Then who is he?"

"Jesus of Galilee."

Marema blocked both her ears with her thumbs, covered her eyes with her fingers, and shook her head violently to demonstrate that she couldn't understand a thing of what she saw or heard. But Melita drew her close, made her lie down in bed with her, and, caressing her, began to tell her that she, Melita, could not conceive of life on earth as an aim worth worrying or striving for, that life's joys were all too short-lived and left mere emptiness and suffering in their wake, that the "union of hearts" singers glorify was utterly flimsy if it consisted of the impulses of passion, that such a union, no matter what reinforced it, could never be permanent or solid, that only one union was true and strong: the union of those who have identical thoughts and agree in their understanding of life, and thus harness themselves to one yoke . . .

"So," added Melita after setting out her ideas at length in this spirit, "that is the union that can be spoken of as solid bliss: obeying the laws of earthly life, which is ordained for us as preparation for a different, higher goal that we do not yet know. But who among us can accord his thoughts and his moods so completely as to merge with another person? Not me, nor the innocent Prudentius, I hope. Do you really think that he has the same idea as I have of the world and man's place in it?"

"Oh, that would be terrible, Melita!"

"Perhaps it would. But what frightens me is something else . . . I'm frightened of sharing a bed with a man with whom I have no spiritual connection, only wild stirrings of flesh and blood. Oh, how horrible and terrible it must be to wake up after an intoxicating night with what you call your 'love'! How I'd be bound to shudder, for fear of children resulting from those embraces, children whose mother has to argue with their own father about their upbringing."

"Why argue, then, Melita?"

"Because you can't just look on if the children are not being directed toward the serious sacred things that develop a person's spirit and 'make him master over the wild beasts that live in man himself.' Oh, how terrible that is, how terrible!"

"But you were Alcaeus's wife and might have become mother to several children."

Melita sighed, as she replied, "Might have! You're right: I was the wife of a man with whom I had nothing in common, as far as ideas go. I was a child when I became Alcaeus's wife, and I didn't then have the thoughts about life that I now have. Do you want to reproach me for living with him and not running away from his house, not arousing his anger by rejecting his caresses and embraces, which I had to accept, once I'd made myself his wife? Yes, I endured all that, and I found it very hard, but I understood that it wasn't Alcaeus's fault that he saw the world in a different light than I. When they sang the wedding hymns for us, I couldn't warn him about that, and for the same reasons I couldn't leave him as long as he was able to be my husband. But now that it's all over, through no will of mine, now that I'm free and can clearly see a goal in my life, I don't want to weary my spirit with the duties of marriage to a man. I don't consider it my vocation and duty to produce children so that there will be someone to collect shells and stones on the seashore. You're wrong if you think that I'll agree to let anyone limit my right to surrender my self, body, and blood for the good of the eternal spirit, whose life I can sense within me. Oh, what children you are! Oh, what senseless, poor children! Get up, Marema, get up, my friend! You're my friend now, not a slave, slavery is against the law, and I release you and . . . I shall try to see you get everything you think will make you happy. Just kiss me, in the normal way, as a friend, and, if you love me, do me one more very great service . . . Get up, Marema! Go quickly to see the widow

Euphrosyne . . . tell her . . . ask her . . . persuade her . . . that Melita cannot . . . is not fit to be Prudentius's sweetheart. Off you go!"

And Marema actually got up and left, but she was very upset. She ran to see the widow Euphrosyne, woke her up, and told her, her heart sinking, "Another great misfortune has happened."

"Has your house burned down?"

"No, but Melita, my mistress . . . has lost her mind."

"O gods, O gods! Why is love so all-powerful over us?"

"It's awful!"

"Tell me quickly what she's saying . . . She can't wait for Prudentius to come? Yes? Speak!"

"She says . . . she's utterly against marriage."

"To Prudentius?"

"To anyone."

Euphrosyne screamed, "O gods, what madness! But this will pass."

XI

The widow Euphrosyne and the young Marema believed that everything that the young Christian Melita had told them was utterly alien to their understanding. Neither woman could concede that a person still in possession of their right mind could have concepts so insane, in their view, about the meaning of life and about the chief mission of woman, such as the highly strung Melita had begun to express . . . And because this happened so unexpectedly, so suddenly, and so soon after Alcaeus's young widow had undergone so many shocking surprises, Prudentius's mother, the elderly widow Euphrosyne, had quite sufficient reason, in her opinion, to conclude that Melita was undergoing not a firm and clearly considered change in her way of thinking but a mere temporary seething of stormy impulses, which gave her thoughts a morbid and confused turn.

The widow Euphrosyne was very fond of Melita for her beauty, even temper, and elegant homemaking, and she knew that her son, the young Prudentius, had long been passionately in love with Melita: his lips, whether awake or dozing, whispered nothing but Melita's name, so precious to the youth. But the news Marema had brought perturbed her badly, and she asked Marema not to tell anyone else in the village what she had heard from Melita, who was in such a peculiar, excited state.

"Why subject her to everyone's mockery and condemnation? Better to let it pass and be forgotten, just as many youthful dreams get forgotten. There's no great danger. Thank the gods, in this village nobody has turned up intoxicated with the dreamy doctrine some Jews brought from their Galilee, so far away and so useless. Only Melita somehow got wind of this teaching from a friend of hers, and now she's raving. They say this life is only worth attention as a way of preparing yourself for some other life we have no idea about, because it's so unlike what we see, as an acorn is unlike the oak that can come from the acorn. But all that's nonsense, and Melita won't be in this mood for long; she'll soon switch to another mood, more full of life and better suited for a beautiful young woman whom such a perfect, handsome man as the innocent Prudentius is ardently and passionately in love with! Wasn't it Melita who taught him so many things? She trained him to be nimble and strong and often admired him and took part in races with him and other exercises. Isn't it her fault that he has fallen in love with her as a woman, that his heart has long been burning with the fire of passion? It's bound to flare up even more strongly now that Alcaeus has left us for the realm of Hades. After all, it's significant that the clairvoyant virgin, in front of the people's emissaries, joined their hands over Alcaeus's body. Can Melita herself possibly desire to destroy all that? Is it possible for such a young beautiful widow, who was wife to a husband as grim as the seafarer Alcaeus, to refuse the passionate caresses and embraces of such a gentle youth as the innocent Prudentius?

"After all, he's so elegant, so gentle, that Melita's refusal of him as her husband would be utterly certain to kill him! Yes, it will kill him, the finest figure of a man, the kindest and best-endowed youth anywhere on the coast! Can a most abstract and incomprehensible thing like this be allowed to kill him? Can there be a faith so strange that it could induce a woman to reject a handsome young man, like the innocent Prudentius, who is in love with her? No, it's all nonsense! All we need is to get them kissing! Quickly, decorate the altar of the god of love and make Melita offer a sacrifice to Hymen."

The widow Euphrosyne used all these arguments and hopes to rouse the soul of the dark-skinned Marema, a girl who was at the most fiery age. Euphrosyne suddenly saw this fire lighting up Marema's entire body, pouring from under her black waving hair onto her smooth brow, her sensuous eyes, her neck, her quivering shoulders and breasts, moving like waves under their light covering.

Now Euphrosyne for the first time saw the real Marema, and felt that this dark-faced girl, too, was beautiful, even though her beauty was quite different from Melita's, and here the spirit was unlikely to clash with flesh and blood. Marema would almost certainly not reproach nature for giving everyone the same desires!

The widow Euphrosyne was unaware that she was getting carried away by Marema's passionate beauty. She let both her hands just brush against Marema's shoulders, then smiled and, quickly pushing her back, exclaimed, "Well, imagine! Really, how beautiful you are, Marema! Would you believe it, I don't seem to have noticed you until now!"

"Really!" Marema said, and joked, "In Phoenicia, where I was born, there are a lot of beautiful women; my mother may have been one of them."

"Did you never see her?"

Marema shook her head to indicate no.

"And you don't know her at all?"

"Not at all. Otherwise I wouldn't have been sold here as a slave."

"Yes, of course," Euphrosyne said, as if talking to herself. "You know what, my friend Marema, you're now too beautiful to be a slave. Perhaps Melita did the right thing to keep you while she was married to Alcaeus. She didn't care for him, and you wouldn't make her feel jealous, but when my son, Prudentius, becomes her husband . . . That's when I wouldn't advise her to keep you on. You're dangerous . . . Any wife with you under the same roof would have to be worried. You make men lose their senses . . . it's something you waft . . . I'm afraid it may be the intoxicating smell of some sorcerer's root."

Marema burst into loud guffaws, but Euphrosyne went on complaining in all sincerity: "No, really . . . Poor Prudentius! Don't look at him with those burning eyes of yours, Marema! I'll try to find you a kind mistress who will pay Melita a good price for you and will treat you well."

"Wouldn't that mistress have a husband too?"

"Yes, but he's very old."

"The older, the better: the sooner he grows to hate his old wife and bend at the knees of a good-looking slave girl. Then that kind mistress you want to settle me with will scratch Melita's face to pieces with her nails and sell me to an even worse harridan. It's not easy to settle things with me like that. But you needn't worry, widow Euphrosyne. Let me tell you: I'm not a slave anymore. Marema is free. Melita has set me free."

"Just recently?"

"This evening, when she decided that all the repetitions in married love are so boring. She decided there and then that I shouldn't suffer repetition in the torments of slavery. So I'm free, widow Euphrosyne, and I think that earthly love between people of the opposite sex is the greatest pleasure in life. I could . . . I'd even like to sacrifice my own body at the temple of Isis, or I could provide grandchildren for the mother of some handsome, strong youth, but . . . you know . . . I'm having doubts myself."

"What's making you have doubts?"

"The same thing that is happening to Melita . . ."

"What do you think that is?"

Marema shrugged her swarthy shoulders, took the widow Euphrosyne by both hands, bent close to her face, and told her quietly but clearly, "I sometimes also feel . . . that *He* is somewhere . . ."

"Who?"

"The man who taught her knowledge that we don't have."

"Then she can tell us about it."

"She hasn't yet found it . . . but she hasn't stopped seeking for something we aren't looking for . . . Who is this man who gives her the strength to endure all life throws at us, and to renounce all that attaches us to this life? Why does she shackle herself, but set me free? Oh, Euphrosyne! Suppose Melita is right, and we're not! Suppose our beginning wasn't entirely on this earth and our end won't be, either; suppose this life is just a school or an inn? How ashamed we'd be! How terrible it would be! Someday I want to find out more . . . I want to understand . . . And I will understand as much as I want . . . Don't you believe it, widow Euphrosyne? It isn't only old men in long togas who understand the real meaning of life . . . I can hear with my own ears my blood roaring and my heart pounding, and at the same time I can hear something else, too . . . something that my mistress has heard more plainly and which has made her . . ."

"Temporarily mad, you mean?"

"Yes! Though I'm not sure . . . I'm not sure what I'm trying to say. I think I may be raving."

Euphrosyne stroked Marema's shoulder and said, "You are really both very young and you both

imagine things. You've been living too long on your own, with no husband to caress you . . . We old women know this only too well. Be diligent in your marriage, have as many children as you can, feed them well with your breast milk—there you have the real meaning of life. Now off you go, Marema: see Melita and tell her that I'll come and see her soon and bring her some nice fish. And today, no later, we'll make the marriage final. Poor Prudentius has, in any case, been waiting too long for her embraces and he's been languishing and suffering too much."

That very moment, as if not by chance, the women's ears caught the sound of Prudentius's languid delirium through the thick curtain: "Oh, don't go away . . . don't go away, Melita! Show me some mercy. Stand on the leaf growing by the path . . . Touch it with your foot so poor Prudentius can kiss it afterward . . . Give me some relief from my terrible agony! I'll take that leaf and cover it with kisses. I'll wipe my tears with it, tears from my constant weeping, day and night, hiding from everyone the real reason I'm weeping, and . . . then . . . I'll put the leaf on my heart . . . to stop it beating . . . to stop it living—because without you, life for me is full of torment, and there's nobody in the world who means anything . . . I'm leaving . . . I'm . . . fading, Melita!"

"What do you think it's like for a mother to hear this?" exclaimed the widow Euphrosyne.

"It's horrible to hear, even if you're not a mother," replied Marema, who was thoroughly upset. The two women left in opposite directions: Euphrosyne went to the fish market; Marema went to Melita's house.

XII

The widow Euphrosyne soon turned up, as she had promised, at Melita's. She'd brought a delicious dish of fish, and as soon as she arrived, she began a conversation that aimed to make Melita agree to marry Prudentius. She wanted to get it over with as soon as possible, thinking that Melita would not resist. But Euphrosyne had miscalculated.

It was no use, the widow Euphrosyne arguing that they only had one man, the young and innocent Prudentius, left in two houses linked by a long-standing friendship; that they, the two women, had to look after him, because they both needed him; and that the best thing was for everyone to unite and live in one common household. Prudentius could hire himself a helmsman for a share of the profits and venture out to sea. The two women would wait for him to return and make his homecoming joyful and happy.

"And there's no need to fear poverty," Euphrosyne went on. "Prudentius now knows what Hyphas and Alcaeus bought and sold, and where, and he'll carry on the business as before. I'm old now, and I don't need bracelets or rings or necklaces, I'll happily give them all to you, so you can add them to your own and put them on whenever you want. And in any case . . . in any case," Euphrosyne lowered her voice, "I don't know if it's true, but there was a rumor that Hyphas and Alcaeus sometimes actually did smash other people's boats and take their property by force. And everything they took, they shipped off to a little island, but that island is kept safe behind sharp rocks and turbulent currents and they were the only ones who knew about it. I hear it's very hard to get through the sharp rocks to that island, but the island is actually habitable: it's covered with vegetation, it's got a source of fresh water that runs down from a rock, and in the middle there are two caves, one above the other: one cave has an entrance at ground level, but climbing into the other one is very difficult . . . A long time ago they made themselves somewhere to live in the top cave, and that's where Alcaeus and Hyphas used to stay and hide when they were on the lookout for loot. They would sail out from there, attack and rob, and then vanish with their loot. They didn't dig the caves out; they're natural, and the one on top, on the edge of a high cliff, was so carefully hidden that no outsider had a hope of spotting it. The only way to get into it is to press against it with a pole that's hidden in a very secret place at the bottom of a dark ravine. All you have to do is pick up the pole and put it away, and the top cave is impenetrable. But it's small, compared with the lower cave, where, thanks to Alcaeus's and Hyphas's efforts, over the years a lot of goods have accumulated—a big store of wheat, dried fruit, dried fish, and barrels of various wines and olive oil and walnut oil. But there are also bales and whole trunks full of clothing and utensils, there are animal skins, purple dye, and everything you could imagine."

"Yes, and it all belongs to other people . . . and it's all wet with the tears and blood of the people they took it from," Melita interrupted.

"Well, yes, of course, the people it was taken from . . . perhaps they . . . did weep . . . but all that was long ago . . ."

"But it still happened."

“Well, it did, of course.”

“And they were shown no pity; they were robbed . . . and they were killed, too . . .”

“Perhaps.”

“There’s no ‘perhaps’ about it: it definitely happened! And their mothers and wives and children were waiting for them, of course . . . they gathered, they sobbed, and they cursed the crime . . . our husbands . . . Alcaeus and Hyphas.”

“You’re twisting it all again, Melita!”

“I don’t know how you can ignore it. It’s not my fault if my spirit keeps looking at what you refuse to see. To my mind, three years have passed since Hyphas died, and all that time Alcaeus was going to sea with your son. Poor Prudentius! Poor, innocent Prudentius! He’s saying nothing, he’s hiding it, but of course he did everything that Alcaeus used to do, he helped him raid people at sea, rob them of their wine, fruit, grain, and other goods, and drown the people themselves in the sea . . . and hit them with an oar if they surfaced.”

“Oh, Melita, life is just the same on earth as at sea: one man hits, the other drowns!”

“True! And that’s what you call ‘living.’ Never taking your eyes off each other, dashing about, grabbing and acquiring whatever you can steal from one another, then hiding it all where nobody can get at it . . . What for? What for? No, I agree with you that our whole life, on water or on dry land, is like that, but I can’t go along with it: I don’t want it . . . I’m not going to fight for a bigger share of anything in life. And now I’m free to act, because Alcaeus’s death has released me from all my vows.”

The widow Euphrosyne then embraced her and told her straight out why she’d come: in order to get Melita to agree to marry again, to marry Prudentius who was so passionately in love with her. But Melita exclaimed, “What! Marry again! Another set of vows and more worries about keeping them? Never, not for anything in the world!”

“But what don’t you like about my son, Prudentius?”

“I don’t dislike him at all, but I dislike the obligations that come with remarriage.”

“But why?”

“I don’t consider that constantly thinking about how to please a husband is the best way to live.”

“But what could be better?”

“What’s better? Living for the common good, especially for the good of those who have a hard life in this world. That’s what the Father of our God wants.”

“The gods want people to live and multiply.”

Melita said nothing.

“Actually, what’s more important than bringing up children to be decent citizens?”

“Helping all children, including other people’s, to grow up with the least amount of suffering.”

“What you say makes no sense, and it’s unpleasant, Melita.”

“I’m expressing the simplest ideas.”

“Do you want to be on your own?”

“Why would I be? I’ll be with people whom I can serve or help.”

“Well, make a start then. Do a service: let yourself pity the anguish and sufferings of my son who’s passionately in love with you! Let yourself be moved by the innocent Prudentius’s moans. He’s enduring so much, because all womanhood is for him incarnated only in Melita . . .”

“Oh, do stop, widow Euphrosyne. Anyone who has the same thirsts as your son will never die of thirst.”

“Yes,” the widow went on, “see how cruel Melita is. She is deaf to him and can’t even pity the tears pouring down the wrinkled cheeks of the poor widow Euphrosyne, her aunt and Prudentius’s mother.”

Melita looked at the widow and saw that her face really was wet with tears, which were flowing down her cheeks in torrents.

“You’re both being cruel,” said Melita.

But Euphrosyne shook her head, saying, “You’ve no right to talk of cruelty!”

“Yes I do: I mean your cruelty. I’m not reproaching you, I just want you to understand me. I’ll tell you now why you are cruel: I believe people have been given an opportunity to live for all eternity and it depends on a human being whether he enters that eternal life or whether he fades to nothing within the short time that our candle burns on earth. I have been granted an awakening of my spirit from its natural sleep and, now it has awoken, it can hear a voice calling loudly to it and telling it to cast off all its shackles. My spirit wants to run somewhere where it can hear the call, while you want to shackle my feet with bonds of passion and to force vows on me that I cannot make, because . . . I can’t promise myself to anybody . . .”

“You must surely feel that you’re being very inconstant.”

“Why do you go on at me about constancy? What do I have to stick to . . . what sort of constancy? Today I am what I am; tomorrow perhaps my spirit will see something even wider, and when my spirit is fully fledged, it will soar somewhere higher and farther . . . to eternity!”

“What’s so good about that?” Euphrosyne interrupted her. “If you want to sacrifice yourself, then make Prudentius happy: he’s so desperately in love with you and suffering so terribly that he can’t tell the difference anymore between what he sees and what he dreams of in his agonizing nightmares. Poor child! His imagination never gives him a moment free of you, his lips are constantly whispering, ‘Melita.’ Poor Prudentius! He’s burning with youthful desires; his lips kiss the air where he can sense you through the walls and rocks. Oh, have some pity! Pity him! Pity us both, Melita!”

The widow Euphrosyne ended their conversation with this passionate plea; weeping copiously, her arms outstretched, she threw herself on the ground at Melita’s feet.

Melita was in a very difficult position, but she resisted the widow Euphrosyne’s pleas and, although trying to show regret and sympathy, she gave no hope of agreeing to marry.

“What!” Euphrosyne exclaimed. “Do you really want to be so adamant even if Prudentius dies or loses his reason?”

“Why talk about something that hasn’t happened yet?” Melita replied, suppressing her impatience.

“You can’t think it impossible, can you, for a man to lose his reason because of agonizing love? It happens, after all.”

“Oh, of course it does!” Melita replied. “But it happens because people let themselves fall victim to their coarse desires and refuse to resist them.”

“Do you think those desires can be resisted?”

“It goes without saying . . . Of course . . .”

Then the two women heard Marema shouting loudly: she was running to the house, shouting from afar, “Euphrosyne, madam! Euphrosyne, madam! Get to the house as fast as you can. Something terrible has happened. Prudentius began washing and suddenly collapsed to the floor; now he’s rolling about, foaming at the mouth, and roaring like a lion cub. It took five of us to hold him down, and Agabus, the potter, has covered his head in wet clay, but hurry, madam: it’s not likely to do any good. Poor Prudentius! Poor Prudentius! I don’t think he’ll recover.”

XIII

When she heard that her son was in such cruel torments, the widow Euphrosyne could only give Melita a silent look full of reproach; then, forgetting how old she was, she ran home, to attend to Prudentius’s agonies. Meanwhile, Marema told Melita what had happened in greater detail. She added quietly to what we now know.

“There’s no point hiding the fact that he’s going through all this because the cruel feelings for you that obsess him have worn him down. You have as much power over his entire being as nature does. Six of us, if you count Agabus, couldn’t cope with the demon that tensed the young man’s muscles and made his blood seethe so much that his whole mouth was covered with pink foam. I covered his glazed eyes with your shawl, which I had on my shoulders and was going to wash at the spring, and then Prudentius suddenly calmed down and whispered, ‘Melita! Melita is nearby . . . Gods! Let me die before she goes away!’

“And forgive me, mistress,” Marema concluded, “he was suffering so badly that I couldn’t take your shawl off him. It will make him feel a little better, so let him . . . He wrapped it around his hands and pressed it to his heart, and the convulsions gradually died down. Maybe he’ll even . . . go to sleep or . . .”

“Or what?”

“He’ll go to the kingdom of the shades without further suffering.”

Melita rose to her feet and said, “Let’s go together.”

“What! You mean go . . . to Euphrosyne’s house where the wretched Prudentius is lying, with his head on fire and covered in wet clay?”

“Of course I do.”

“Why would you go there?”

“Why? Someone is suffering, so I want to go there.”

“Of course, but not to make him suffer worse? You’re not going to take your shawl off him? You’re not angry with me for leaving the cloth there?”

Melita replied that she wasn’t in the least angry with Marema: on the contrary, she was even glad that Marema had left the shawl and that it had relieved Prudentius’s capricious illness. She added that she did

not care what people in the village said or thought, that none of that was worth a single minute of human suffering if there was any way to help.

"Oh, mistress!" Marema exclaimed joyfully. "Let's go quickly; let's hurry to that house of tears! You have power over the dear youth's entire nature, and just the sound of your voice, your arrival, will be enough to summon Prudentius back to life, as long as we manage to reach Euphrosyne's house before her son's heart stops beating in his chest."

"Let's hurry!"

"Let's hurry, let's hurry!"

They grabbed each other's hands and ran briskly and steadily, one as clear as the daylight, the other as dark as a southern night. Their hair flew in the wind, and the breath of life quietly spread in their wake.

"Oh, you'll save him! You will!" Marema whispered as she squeezed Melita's hand and both of them ran on.

"Perhaps . . ." Melita responded with a gentle squeeze of the hand.

What had happened?

Before Melita and Marema, so fleet of foot, had reached the widow Euphrosyne's house, Prudentius's awful attack had left him. He sighed calmly, sat up on the floor on which he had been lying, smiled a happy smile, and exclaimed, his arms outstretched, "Gods! Praise to you forever and ever. Melita's heart is filled with pity. Melita has arisen. Melita is rushing here to drop her sympathy like dew on my burned-out heart. Here she is, here she is! Quickly, draw the curtain!"

As Prudentius's voice rang out with confidence and strength, his wish was immediately fulfilled, and when the curtain was drawn, everyone could see revealed the beautiful Melita, all flushed after her rushed journey on foot, followed by Marema, no less beautiful in her way.

"Instead of one provider of relief, two have hurried here to see you," the women standing around Prudentius whispered.

He himself was more like a child whose severe torments had just lifted, remembering them with both delight and pain.

Prudentius sat looking the new arrivals in the face, smiling and repeating, like a child, "Here she is . . . Melita! Marema!"

XIV

The widow Euphrosyne was glad beyond words that Melita had come and could see for herself how badly Prudentius was suffering and that any relief of his agony directly depended on her.

Melita saw all this without arguing. The proof was only too obvious, and it became clear to Melita that she no longer had any chance of living in her house in the same community as the widow Euphrosyne's house. She would constantly be coming across Prudentius here, and that would aggravate his agonizing passion, which she had no wish to reciprocate. Everyone in this community would be bound to reproach her for cruelty, would talk about her stupid stubbornness, for people have since time immemorial preferred to consider any concern for preserving one's spirit totally untrammeled as "stubbornness." Moreover, Prudentius's passion would turn into madness and she would have to fear his making an attempt on his own life in another similar attack. Then the widow Euphrosyne's grief would know no limits, and the softhearted Melita would be unable to bear the sight of all these miseries that everyone would inevitably blame on her. She had, perhaps, only one alternative: to leave her house and community secretly, and hide for the rest of her life. Melita was prepared to do so; she would arrange to live with her childhood friend, the Christian Erminia, a woman of the same mind; but Prudentius was capable of pursuing her everywhere, disturbing her peace, and ruining his own life still more. She had to seek another way out of this situation, a way better suited to everyone. She decided that she must devise a more ingenious plan and, once she had thought it out, implement her decision, whatever the obstacles.

This was her mood when the ecstatic Prudentius's infatuated eyes saw her; when she was sure he had calmed down and could understand her, she offered him her hand and calmly said, "Don't give in to despair, kind Prudentius. You are not going to languish, as you have been languishing, forever. From now on I shan't avoid you, and I shall think how to make you happy. But I beg you, show me trust and a little patience. I'm very much in anguish too, and my spirit needs rest and calm. Let me have just three days in peace, alone, and on the fourth day, before evening, come to the seashore where our boat is beached, and I'll tell you the decision I've made, and it will be firm enough for you to rely on. And now, for three days, do me a favor and stay calm."

"Oh, I'm ready to wait for your answer not just three days but three years," Prudentius replied,

revived. “As long as you don’t reject me . . . as long as I have something to wait for.”

“Well, three years would be too long. In three years’ time you may reject me, because I’m older than you . . . No, just wait for three days; that will be enough.”

“Me reject you? O gods! Strike me down, just gods, if it’s possible for anyone to replace Melita in my heart!”

“Don’t swear any oaths, Prudentius, and don’t call on the gods as witnesses: you know nothing about their nature. Instead, let time itself show us what we are and what we merit.”

“I agree, I agree!” exclaimed Prudentius. “All eternity will convince you that you are the most precious thing in the world to me and that there’s nothing that I could prefer to you even for a minute.”

“Well, just wait!”

Melita parted amicably from Prudentius and his mother, the widow Euphrosyne. She went back home with Marema, leaving the widow and Prudentius reassured and ready to wait three days for her decision.

Everyone else in the village now awaited this decision with curiosity, for they were all inquisitive. Was Melita being underhanded, pretending that she was refusing to have as a husband a youth of incomparable beauty who was passionately in love with her and three years younger?

“Melita is up to something, isn’t she? What does she have in mind, what’s the trick?”

Three days flew past while everyone waited in curiosity: all three days Melita spent at home, while Prudentius recovered from his terrible torments, and on the fourth day, just before evening, he went to the seashore and saw Melita and Marema waiting for him.

XV

When they met, Melita told Prudentius, “Everything is going well: it won’t be long now before we reach our goal and make our desires come true.”

“I’m out of my mind with happiness, now that we have the same desires!” Prudentius exclaimed, irradiating happiness.

“That’s not what I said,” replied Melita, “but it doesn’t matter. It will all depend on what you consider to be the greatest form of happiness.”

“It’s been reached, anyway.”

“Not yet. Before you become my husband you have to carry out three requests of mine.”

“I’m ready to carry out an infinite number of them.”

“No, three will do. First of all, I don’t want to be an object of attention for everybody, not now when you start carrying out my requests nor afterward when I may have to do your will and pay my debt for your compliance by serving you and giving you a woman’s affection.”

“Oh, just say right now what I must do! If you want to hide yourself away . . . if you want to be out of everybody’s sight . . .”

“Yes, almost everybody’s . . . Let’s just have Marema with us, but I don’t want even the widow Euphrosyne there. Her soft heart and her anxiety may ruin things that must come about in quiet solitude and peace.”

“Fine! I promise on my mother’s behalf: she is so fond of me that she’ll agree to anything, and as for the possibility of hiding from everyone somewhere nobody knows about and nobody can get to, then that’s in my power, in a way that you wouldn’t hear of even in the most ingenious fairy tale.”

And the infatuated Prudentius, without needing to be questioned by Melita, told her about the blossoming ravine in the rocks, concealed amid other inaccessible rocks, where they had two caves, plentiful stores to sustain life, a stream of fresh water, a herd of goats, and crested chickens.

“Nobody can come there,” Prudentius added, “except the two men who have left us to live in the dark kingdom of shades; I’m the only one who knows a safe, narrow creek that allows you to get close to that rock and find our ravine. If you want the most inviolable isolation . . .”

“With you and Marema!” interrupted Melita, quietly putting her hand in Prudentius’s.

“Oh, you’re filling me with delight! So if you trust me and aren’t afraid of sailing in a boat across a narrow, stormy passage where I know every stone, then I might as well say that everything will be ready when you want to set sail.”

“Excellent; have it ready tomorrow, at sunset. But first, go home today and tell your mother what we have decided. I want to know that she agrees to everything, and I want to entrust my house and garden to her, because Marema will be leaving with me to live in your ravine, and my house will be left empty. Then tomorrow morning ask the potter Agabus to come, and bring him with you, so you can carry my bed, bedding, and wardrobes with my clothes and all my pots and so on, and supplies of food, which

won't be any use here but will come in handy there . . . I want to gather everything and take it away, so it can all be used, since we may well spend a very long time there."

Prudentius listened to all this in transports of delight and with complete attention; Melita's last words made him press her hand passionately to his breast; he whispered in one breath, "Oh, I'm sure that nobody could ever dispense by just one word so much ecstasy as you are giving my heart!"

She gave him an indulgent look, as a mother would a child, quietly smiled at him, and replied, "Oh, my innocent Prudentius! Don't praise me so much, I find it hard to listen to your praise. Let's act, instead . . . let's make haste . . . we mustn't waste a single minute. I'm going back home now with Marema and I'll be quick and pack all my things, while you go and see your mother and tell her we've decided to go away and carry out what has to be carried out there, far away from other people. Tell the widow Euphrosyne from me that my spirit is full of concern for her and for you, and that I have never desired anything so much as I now desire to see you all in circumstances best suited to you."

After that, Melita arose and went to the village, holding Prudentius with one hand and Marema with the other, and so they reached the point where the paths to their houses forked.

Here Melita let go of Prudentius's hand, told him again what he had to tell his mother, before departing with Marema to her own house. The two women did in fact spend the night together packing everything of value in Alcaeus's house into sacks and bundles. All the food was put into baskets, and wineskins and cheeses were fetched from the ice pits, and all of this prepared for the voyage. By dawn everything was ready, and all that was left hanging on a sharp fish tooth on the wall were Alcaeus's wide belt, decorated with hammered gold and precious stones, and a shepherd's simple reed pipe, into which Melita inserted a scrolled papyrus. She found time before dawn to inscribe a few words on that scroll.

Her lines ran: "I have been given freedom and I don't want to lose it again, but I have been sent a test that I cannot evade. I hope, however, that my spirit will retain its strength and I will succeed in pacifying that erotic passion flaring up in another person against my wishes, with the help of the same crude natural forces that he lets dominate his spirit. If I triumph over all this, I will seek a path toward you and will come to you to end my period on earth together with you, forgetting about myself and, together with you, serving others, at the behest of Him, Whose sacred word has lit up within us the light of understanding, as well as faith in our spirit's eternal life."

When Melita had inserted the papyrus into the hollow reed, she sealed the ends with wax and hung the shepherd's pipe back on the wall next to the precious belt; then she immediately turned around and saw Marema standing by the door, putting her fingers to her mouth.

"You're keeping an eye on me and spying," Melita said with a smile.

"No," replied Marema, "I'm not keeping an eye on you and I won't let anyone know, but everything tells me that you've devised some cunning plan to make sure things go in quite a different way from what you are promising Prudentius."

"Well, if you know so much, tell me what I have promised him."

"You promised that tonight you, he, and I will leave here to live on a wild rock in an unknown ravine, where we will hide ourselves away for a long time . . ."

"All that will happen; by the time the stars come out, we will be at sea in our boat."

"Then I'm even more confused . . . you must have something in mind which is quite beyond me to understand, if you're not going to tell me."

"Oh, my friend Marema, you've guessed! I won't tell you anything until the time is ripe, and I ask you to promise that you won't ask me any more about it. That will be the best repayment I could have from you. Don't inquire about anything, Marema: you will be the only person to see what will happen, but it won't be here, not now, and not immediately. I'm not planning to do anything bad to anyone, and Prudentius will choose whatever lot he prefers for himself. I'll surrender myself to his will . . . But you've guessed . . . he will have to prove to me that the attraction he feels for me really is more powerful than anything and cannot be discarded for any cruder attraction. He has to convince me so that I am left in no doubt, and you, my good friend Marema, must help me arrange this, because it means too much to me. Don't refuse, Marema!"

"Oh," replied Marema emphatically, "how could you doubt me, Melita? I know your mind and kind heart so well that I don't need to force myself to give you the most awful oaths to serve you in any way you want. I know that you won't harm anybody, just as you haven't done me any harm all the time that I was your slave. Whatever you say, Marema will do everything without letting her own feelings get in the way . . . I swear . . ."

"That's enough!" Melita interrupted. "Don't swear by anything: swearing is forbidden, because we are all in the power of Almighty God. I don't need an oath to believe you, and I shan't hide anymore that I do have a plan in mind, which I don't want to tell anyone until the right time, and which I can carry out

only with your help.”

“Believe me, you have my help without any reservations, and . . .”

“That’s enough, Marema!” exclaimed Melita, and the former mistress and slave girl embraced each other. The embrace lasted just a moment. That was how the widow Euphrosyne caught them, as she quietly arrived; behind her came Prudentius and the potter Agabus with his long poles, which were meant to be made into stretchers to carry Melita’s possessions onto the boat.

XVI

Right away they made stretchers and began carrying the luggage on board. This was done by Prudentius and the potter Agabus; they were helped by Marema, who made frequent trips to the boat for this. Euphrosyne and Melita, however, stayed behind in the house; Melita was cooking dinner over the fire for those who were loading the sloop. Prudentius’s mother was helping Melita and, as they worked, she talked to her about what Melita was up to, as far as she understood it.

The widow Euphrosyne thought that Melita was leaving with her son because she was fond of Prudentius but was very modest and had an exaggerated view of her reputation for chastity. Euphrosyne thought that Melita was reluctant to show her inclinations in front of everybody, but once she was far away she would not be embarrassed by anyone and could freely surrender to love and with all the ardor of a passion that had been repressed too long. Convinced that this was so, the widow Euphrosyne was completely unperturbed as she watched the preparations. Melita had not, however, told her anything positive; several times she asked Euphrosyne to keep calm, even if she heard nothing from them for a long time.

“I don’t mind if you’re away for a year!” the widow Euphrosyne responded. “I’ve been in such anguish at the sight of my son’s agony that I’m ready to endure all the suffering of not knowing anything for ages, as long as I can be certain that he is not going to have to endure such hopeless torment as he has undergone so far.”

“As far as that is concerned, you can be quite certain that Prudentius is not going to suffer any torments such as he used to suffer,” Melita replied.

“That’s the only thing I need to be sure of.”

“And you will be, but you did say that you were prepared to spend a whole year without news.”

“I did . . . Very well, if that’s what you need . . .”

“Yes, that may be just what is needed . . .”

The widow Euphrosyne wagged a finger to warn Melita and said with a smile, “I know . . .”

“What do you know?”

“In a year’s time . . . I might see a charming grandchild! Why not, that’s lovely . . . That will put an end to all the gossip about your former husband, Alcaeus. I understand you: women like you always love passionately but modestly. May the gods be with you: burn flowers for Hymen on the altar stone, and let Marema be a witness of your marriage vows. Then, when a year has passed, I shall embrace you and my grandchild, and then we’ll see to Marema too. She’s a good girl; she deserves a good husband.”

“And I’m sure she’ll find one,” Melita chimed in.

“I think so too. So far we haven’t paid her any attention, but yesterday, when we were talking, it suddenly occurred to me that Marema is in fact very beautiful.”

“Of course she is, of course she’s beautiful! She’s clever and kind and beautiful, and she has a warm heart. What’s more, she’s so strong and healthy! Oh, she deserves an excellent husband, and the fact that you have formed such a high opinion of her makes me extremely happy. I’m glad that I’m setting off from here in complete agreement with you.”

The whole day passed in agreeable conversation; everyone was cheerful, they shared a delicious meal, and before evening fell, Prudentius and Marema had carried the last load from the house to the sloop, while Melita stayed with the potter Agabus to block the entrances. This was when Melita took Alcaeus’s broad belt, studded with jewels, off the wall, showed it to Agabus, and said, “Can you give me an estimate of what this item might fetch if you took it to sell in the big city, where there are rich people?”

Agabus replied, “I can’t put a price on such a valuable thing, but I do know that if I kneaded clay for three hundred years and made a mountain of pots, that wouldn’t make even half the price of each one of these bright jewels.”

“Well then, you don’t have to knead clay for three hundred years and make a mountain of pots: just do this one thing for me, and then this belt can be your reward. And to be sure my words are true, not a joke, take this thing right now and hide it under your clothes. And while you’re doing this, stick this

shepherd's pipe with it and, when we leave, give up your clay: after all, everyone in the village has enough pots."

"Oh, more than enough!" Agabus replied with a laugh. "I don't even know who's going to buy my stock."

"So forget about them. Your wife can sell pots from home to anyone whose pots break; you go to the city of Klazomenai and find my childhood friend called Erminia and give her this shepherd's pipe."

"Fine, and then what else do I have to do?"

"Nothing else."

"Just find Madam Erminia and hand her the pipe, and that's all?"

"Nothing else."

"So is she meant to play this pipe, then?"

Melita smiled at Agabus's joke and answered just as lightheartedly: "The pipe will play what's wanted of its own accord. Though you can tell Erminia that you've seen me and how things were when we parted. And in exchange, take the belt for yourself and sell it wherever you can find a buyer, and then come back home and live out your old age without worrying about poverty."

"All right, that's what I'm going to do! I swear by the gods, that's what I'll do!" the potter exclaimed. "I'll find Madam Erminia and tell her how everything is. And then she can play a tune about it on the pipe."

Then the potter tucked Alcaeus's belt and the pipe away, and he and Melita left Alcaeus's deserted house. When they approached the boat they found Marema holding the oars, her strong arms bared to the shoulder, while Prudentius had torn himself free of the widow Euphrosyne's endless embraces and unfurled the long diagonal sail from its yardarm.

Melita also quickly took her leave of Euphrosyne, and jumped from the shore to the boat.

Marema worked the oars and the heavily loaded sloop rumbled as it scraped the sandy bottom; then, when it reached the open waves, it rocked, its sail filled with wind, and the distance grew greater and greater between the departing travelers and Euphrosyne and Agabus on shore . . .

There was no longer any question of communication between the ship and shore, but now the widow and Agabus could hear harmonious singing: it was a love song whose words and tune the widow and potter immediately recognized. Two voices, Prudentius's and Marema's, were singing.

The singing grew quieter and died down in the distance, but when they were rounding the sharp cape and the sloping sandbank, the sloop turned its sail and seemed to move nearer, and for a moment the sound of singing could be heard again, but this was another song, whose words and tune were unknown to the widow Euphrosyne. A single even, solemn voice was singing.

"It's Melita's voice!" said the widow Euphrosyne.

"Yes, I think so too," responded Agabus.

"What is this strange song?"

"That song? I think . . . It seems to be like a hymn I heard once when we were hurling those strange people off the cliff onto the rocks for trying to persuade us that nobody dies if they begin to live on earth as their Galilean prophet taught them to do."

XVII

The moon shone brightly all night, and the wind that blew favored the sailors. Prudentius knew how to read the sea: he steered the sloop boldly and deftly, as they set their course straight for the mysterious point where he was taking Melita and Marema so that he could fulfill Melita's whim by undergoing the ordeals she imposed and thus win her love.

Given a favorable wind, it was a voyage of thirty-six hours from the village where Alcaeus and Hyphas had lived to reach the cliff where they would have to seek out the hidden shelter used to store the pirates' loot. The course they set was one that never left sight of landfall, although they would sometimes hug the shore, and sometimes, when there were a lot of rocks and sailing close to the shore was dangerous, they moved farther out to sea.

In the middle of the second night the travelers reached a narrow strait behind which a forest of gray rocky cliffs rose up: they seemed to be devoid of vegetation or of inhabitants. At first the cliffs were relatively small, beginning with rocks that only just rose above the water, but then they became more crowded, and the farther they went, the higher they rose, and some of these rocks seemed quite large and elaborate in shape.

The passage between the rocks was extremely dangerous, and only someone who knew the passage

well and who had great skill and strength was capable of making it.

Prudentius had all the necessary qualities in full, and the two women could only admire him as he stood almost naked at the helm and steered the sloop between the razor-sharp rocks, sometimes pushing the boat away with a long pole, sometimes ramming a pike pole into the cracks or using the pike pole to grab hold of jutting outcrops. In the end, however, there were two places where it seemed impossible to sail through, because there was nothing to push against or grab hold of, and the terrible rapids spun the sloop around and sent it toward the sharp rocks; but this was where Prudentius suddenly dived into the water, emerging an instant later, holding a slippery rope that was entangled with seaweed. As he passed the rope through his hands he deftly pulled the sloop across the rapids, which could not otherwise have been crossed under sail or by rowing. The second rapids were crossed in exactly the same way, and the travelers were now near their goal.

Among the tightly packed group of cliffs there was one that did not seem at first glance to differ from the others but was in fact substantially different, for a strange quirk of nature had made three terraces, one above the other, in this cliff; they all faced south, and the middle terrace had an extensive opening that led to a clearing covered in bushes, with two caves, one below and one considerably higher, so that it could only be entered by placing a long, gnarled pole, for want of a ladder. After entering, the ladder was removed and hidden in piles of green diorite rock, where it would lie unnoticed. The side that had a landing and entrances to both caves was free of rocks and overlooked the boundless sea. At the foot of the cliff there was a small but very convenient little sandal-shaped cove. The sloop entered the cove easily and could be beached conveniently and discreetly.

Prudentius made a landing here, disembarked Melita and Marema, and led them up to the caves.

There were extensive living quarters in the lower cave, separated by natural pillars of rock into a number of convenient rooms, two of which were furnished with rugs and animal skins and made a thoroughly healthy and comfortable place to live.

Prudentius gave Melita and Marema this lower cave; he himself was to live in the upper cave, which was more constricted and resembled a pirate's lair, although its air was healthy and pure, and its reed mats made a good bed.

There was such a rich supply of food and various utensils in the lower cave that five people could easily provision themselves there for a whole year.

Melita and Marema thanked Prudentius for the comfortable lodgings he had provided; they were tired by the long sea voyage and immediately laid down to sleep. They slept a long time, and when they woke up the sun was already high in the sky, playing over the sparkling ripples of the sea: they were delighted by the freshness of the air and the panoramic view of the sea. Meanwhile, not far from the entrance, a fire had been lit, and next to it were a half-skinned goat and a vessel of fresh water.

There was no doubt that Prudentius had seen to everything.

When they saw this, the women began looking around to find Prudentius: they wanted to thank him for taking such good care of them, but there was no sign of him. Then Melita and Marema began working around the fireplace; as soon as they finished skinning the goat and jointing the meat they began to boil some of it and skewered other bits on stakes to roast them. Then Prudentius suddenly appeared. He was streaming with sweat as he carried a heavy load from the sea up the steep cliff.

"Well, what a nice host you are!" Marema cried out when she saw him.

"I'd say so," Melita joined in.

Prudentius smiled happily, freed himself of his load, and went up to the women to give a morning greeting.

Then they sat down to lunch, and afterward went to inspect the cliff, where they found, apart from the two caves one above the other, an open space covered with greenery, with hillocks where domesticated goats nibbled at the grass. Here a translucent stream cascaded from above.

"This is a beautiful place!" exclaimed Marema, who was gamboling like a small child. "I wouldn't want ever to go anywhere else." As she spoke, she bent toward Melita's ear and added, "Especially if I could live here not on my own but with someone whom . . . I would . . . fancy, and whom I could make happy with my love."

Melita squeezed her hand, replying, "Who knows? All that could happen . . ."

"How could it?"

"Keep your spirits up: nature allows a lot of things that at first sight look difficult or even impossible."

But Marema burst out into loud laughter and said, "Well, I do know one thing that's quite impossible."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's impossible for Marema with her dark skin to overshadow the lily-like whiteness of Melita's wonderful body."

“Oh, if that were the only thing it depended on, it would be very possible, and you will be convinced of that far sooner than you might think.”

This exchange took place between the women in close whispering, so that Prudentius’s curiosity was inevitably aroused, and Melita immediately noticed and told him, “Dear Prudentius, I’m not surprised that you are intrigued by what Marema and I are discussing, and I think that you will be even more intrigued when you learn that everything we’ve been saying has to do with you. Tell us what your opinion is. Would you want to spend the rest of your life here on this cliff, and how would you like to spend your life?”

Prudentius replied that he would consider it the highest form of happiness to stay here forever with the woman whom he loved, and he would like to spend his life just enjoying her love and forget about everything else in the world.

Melita smiled and told him, “Marema and I have differing views, and what you have just said is closer to Marema’s opinion and quite contrary to mine.”

Prudentius and Marema both started asking her to tell them her opinion. She replied, “This is a beautiful place, but love that separates two people from all others and plunges them into nothing but mutual enjoyment is something I find utterly repellent. I can’t even understand what happiness there can be in that sort of love. I don’t think it deserves to be called love at all: I think it’s something quite different, something you cannot use to educate your spirit, nor spend your life in this world with a good conscience. I would like other people to be here with us and for all of us to benefit one another; I think that this must be where the human life makes sense, not in something that lesser creatures, which don’t have human powers of reasoning, can attain.”

A conversation now began in which all three took a lively part, as they sat in the green diorite rocks overlooking the sea; unawares, the three ended up with two opinions. Melita held on to her view, arguing further that it was vital to have a common love for all humanity and not renounce communion with others, while Marema and Prudentius, carried away by ideas of personal happiness, developed this inclination so much that they finally arrived at the assertion that there was, and could be, no higher love than a love that is content with its chosen object, is warmed and occupied by it alone, and not concerned with anyone else.

When the conversation reached that point, Melita smiled, stopped arguing, and jokingly joined Prudentius’s hand to Marema’s, telling them, “I’m very glad that you agree with each other.”

This embarrassed both Prudentius and Marema; in one of the following days, when Marema was helping Prudentius to unload the boat below and he was carrying up heavy loads to the caves where Melita was cooking dinner over the open fire, Prudentius put his load on the ground and said to Melita, “I still can’t stop thinking about the conversation we had the first day we arrived . . . It seemed to set me apart from you, when my heart is drawn toward you and just coming close to you sets my blood on fire like a flame.”

“Blood? You keep talking about blood, Prudentius. Blood eventually stops boiling . . . What can live forever and what time cannot cool is far more reliable.”

“What is that, Melita?”

“Affinity of spirit . . . concord in desires, unity of final goals!”

But Prudentius shook his head and said reproachfully, “Melita! Melita! Why do you keep saying such outlandish things? Wouldn’t it be simpler if we were bound together not by spirit but by whatever nature uses to unite a man and a woman?”

“No,” answered Melita, “that’s too simple.”

“Oh, let’s put our trust in it . . . Melita, surrender to all-powerful nature, it will never let you down.”

“No, it will let us down sooner than anything else.”

“Nature will let us down?”

“Of course.”

“Never.”

“Well, let’s stop tossing our opinions at each other with no way of proving them. You do remember, of course, our agreement: ‘three days of ordeal.’ ”

“Of course I remember, and I am celebrating in advance the victory of my love over capricious Melita’s stubbornness.”

“Excellent! But control yourself: don’t celebrate too soon. I’m not taking away your hopes, but three days of ordeal lie ahead. *Just three days!* But for those three days you have to obey me in every way.”

“I’m very glad to . . . only, when are you going to begin the ordeal? I want it to start as soon as possible.”

“Now, if you want.”

“I’m dying of ecstasy.”

“Excellent: evening is falling, and in three days, at the same time, I shall be your wife . . . or . . .”

“Finish saying it!”

“Or I won’t be.”

“Why would that be?”

“If you were to refuse me and prefer something else to my affection.”

“Spare me that! That’s the one thing I would never do to you, even if all hell’s demons and ‘all the forces of nature’ were to rise up against me.”

“There you are: ‘*all the forces of nature*’! Why make such bold challenges? It may be that just ‘one force of nature’ will suffice.”

“Begin the ordeal! Tell me what I have to do now.”

“First of all, leave me instantly and go to your quarters in the upper cave.”

“And what am I to do there?”

“Nothing, for the time being.”

“What do you mean, ‘the time being’?”

“Until you start wanting to think more about yourself than about me.”

“Forget it! That will never happen.”

“Off you go, up to your cave.”

“All right, I’m going.”

Prudentius started climbing the ladder and when he reached the entrance to his upper cave, he turned around and shouted, smiling cheerfully, “Hurrah! I’ve now begun my ordeal and become a moment nearer to possessing Melita.”

“First take possession of yourself,” replied Melita, removing the ladder and lowering it to stand diagonally on the second landing.

“I’m locked in!” Prudentius said, laughing.

“Now wait until I call you, as I stand waiting for you by the wedding bed.”

Melita then disappeared into her lower cave.

XVIII

Shortly after Melita’s disappearance, Marema began the climb up the path from the sea. Prudentius noticed her from afar and spoke to her: “Hey, be glad for me, Marema! Melita’s begun my ordeal, and in three days she must keep her word and she’ll be my wife.”

“That’s wonderful news! And what does your ordeal involve?”

“Actually, I don’t know even now; so far she hasn’t told me anything, except that I have to think about her and patiently wait for her to say something, but what she’s going to say, I don’t know.”

“What is our Melita up to?” wondered Marema, with a shake of her head; she went into the cave and meant to question Melita about what would happen next. But Melita was lying down, her eyes closed, asleep, or pretending to be asleep. Marema didn’t dare wake her, but when she went out again to gather a few pine branches and smoke out the insects with them, she saw that Prudentius was standing above her at the entrance to his cave. The moon shone on him and he smiled as he told her, “Give my Melita my regards, Marema.”

Marema, however, was unwilling to respond, so sorry and sad did she feel at the sight of him like a bird in a cage.

Marema couldn’t get a wink of sleep until midnight, and at midnight she heard Melita go outside and come back after some time. When Melita returned, before she lay down, she went up to and bent over the head of Marema’s bed and, seeing Marema was awake, leaped back and said sternly and firmly, “Don’t interfere with anything and don’t ask me questions about anything. Believe me, I’m not a cruel woman and I don’t want anyone to suffer needlessly, but I am doing what I have to do for our common happiness. I beg you to trust me as you have always done and not ask me any more questions.”

“Let things be as you wish.”

At the very first light of dawn, Melita woke Marema up and told her to come with her to finish unloading the boat; when they got down to the shore, Marema saw that Melita had been working there on her own at night. Now they both set to work and labored so relentlessly that by evening everything that had been brought in the boat was dragged ashore, and the boat, lightened of its load, rose up in the water and rocked in its little cove.

All day Melita and Marema stayed on the shore; when it began to get dark, they were still by the sea.

Several times Marema was anxious to leave, but Melita would not let her, and they started the climb back only when the moon had set behind the rocks and darkness fell all around them.

Then they quietly made their way back into the cave, without Prudentius noticing, and, not making a fire to get rid of the insects, they each lay down in their own place in the dark. Melita seemed to fall asleep instantly, but Marema started searching for something and then began to eat; after swallowing a few mouthfuls, she suddenly shrieked, as if she had eaten something piercing or sharp.

Then it turned out that Melita was awake, for she leaped up, all alert, and asked, in shock, "What's happened to you?"

Marema did not reply for a moment, but when Melita repeated her question, Marema replied as if she were far away, "Nothing's happened to me . . . but I don't want to eat anymore, because . . . I've now understood . . . Prudentius has nothing to eat!"

Melita said not a word in response.

They had a disturbed night of broken dreams. Both women dreamed that they could see Prudentius and hear his footsteps, and lo and behold, he was emaciated, his eyes were enlarged and round . . . his gaze was anxious . . . Melita, Melita! Quickly give him something to do!

But he already had his task.

On the morning of the third day, Melita did not emerge at all. Only Marema showed herself outside the cave: Prudentius had been waiting for her to appear.

"Hello, hello, Marema!" he shouted, his voice full of suffering but still cheerful. "Two more nights and days passed and I'm still waiting here for the right I have earned to press my beloved Melita to my faithful heart. I don't have much longer to wait now, but why is she taking so long, why hasn't she already told me how I have to see my ordeal through? Perhaps the reason you've come out is to tell me what I have to do. Quickly, tell me: I'm worn out waiting for Melita's orders . . ."

"Melita hasn't told me anything," replied Marema, trying not to look at Prudentius, who seemed to her, after the most cursory of glances, haggard and terrible.

"Where are you off to?"

"I'm going . . . to try to catch fish and look for birds' eggs in the cracks . . . Melita is cooking a wedding feast for tomorrow evening . . ."

"Oh, so she's already cooking! Excellent, excellent . . . Off you go, as quickly as you can, catch some fish . . . and you'll find eggs in the cliff tops. Probably Melita will come out anyway and tell me what I have to do . . . Actually, I am very hungry."

"When I get back I'll tell her you're hungry."

"No, you mustn't, Marema. I promised her I wouldn't ask for anything until she calls me . . . Be on your way now . . . I need to be patient."

Marema left, and Prudentius stayed on his own, again languishing for a whole day in confinement. He waited for Melita, or called for her, but nothing did any good, for Melita didn't appear for even an instant. She spent the whole day constantly sorting out the things she had brought up from the sloop, and decorated the cave so tastefully that it looked like the well-furnished quarters of someone of refined taste. In the big front room a large table was laid with a lot of expensive fine crockery, and in the distance, behind a pillar, swathed in cultured fabrics, under a blue canopy, there was a high bed, made with luxurious linen and with lamps at its head.

All this had demanded a great deal of art and taste, and it had been difficult to manage such a transformation in one day; but Melita worked without sparing herself. The labor was the only thing that enabled her to ignore Prudentius's pathetic moaning: by noon he had lost patience and was calling Melita, shouting out that he was in agony with hunger.

"Melita!" he shouted. "Melita! How can you forget I'm human and that my stomach never stops letting me know I'm hungry? Quickly, tell me what proof I have to give you that there is nothing for me that compares with your love . . . or I'll die of hunger here."

But Melita kept on tidying up the rooms and ignored his summons; Prudentius suffered like this until evening, when he saw Marema returning. He yelled to her, "My sufferings are beyond measure now . . ."

"Try not to think . . ."

"Oh, I can't, I can't help thinking: hunger is more cruel than any torture. I'm afraid I'll die before morning."

"Try to go to sleep . . . while you're asleep you can dream of Melita."

"Oh, I've tried to sleep . . . and I have the same dreams . . . I want to eat, to eat! I'm afraid, Marema, afraid. I'm sure you've got something there, birds' eggs: throw me one, I'm dying."

"I daren't," Marema replied, and quickly slipped into the cave, which was lit up by many lights and which struck Marema with its unexpected splendor.

“What’s all this for?” she asked.

“Tomorrow there’ll be a wedding banquet here,” replied Melita.

“A wedding banquet! Oh, Melita, watch out, or it might be a funeral feast.” Once she’d said that, Marema sat down, her arms and head drooping, and sobbed.

“Why are you crying?” asked Melita.

“I’ve just seen Prudentius and heard his moans . . . He’s tormented by hunger, he’s dying.”

“But before this he was tormented by quite a different hunger.”

“No, stomach hunger is more terrible than any other form of suffering.”

“Stop it, Marema. I’m not eating, either.”

Marema took a seabird egg out from under her tunic and said, “I’ve spent all day looking and had no luck: the best I could do was to find just two eggs. One, I admit, I ate raw, and I was so hungry that I thought it tasted good. You eat the other. Prudentius asked me for it, but I wouldn’t give it to him.”

“I don’t want it either: I am enduring just as much as Prudentius!” Melita then took the egg from Marema’s hand and threw it to the ground.

“There’s lots to eat here,” she added, “but I haven’t touched a thing. I’m using myself as a measure of what he can stand without endangering his life. Lie down and go to sleep, and tomorrow morning we’ll start cooking dinner, and by evening everything that has taken such a long and agonizing time will be resolved.”

XIX

Now the horrible night had passed that seemed so long to everyone and was so exhausting. A grim morning dawned. Both women woke up early; Marema immediately ran outside to take a look at Prudentius. Overnight the youth had changed more than during all the time hitherto: his face had become gray and shriveled, both eyes were sunken and seemed completely round, while his lips had turned dark, showing two rows of white teeth, which seemed to be loose in the gums, and his tongue and throat were swollen. Hunger was gnawing him to death: Prudentius was now too weak even to groan: he sat slumped against the entrance, pressing his belly with his emaciated hands.

Marema tried to console him, but it was no use telling him that he was close to happiness and possession of Melita: Prudentius did not respond with a single word.

When Marema told Melita, the latter replied, “That’s how it has to be. If people refuse to overcome evil with reason, then suffering will have to do the job. But let’s not talk about this: quickly cook all the best dishes we can cook.”

They chose from their stores the best things and began cooking the dishes they knew how to prepare. This involved a lot of hard work, and their preparations were not quite finished when the sun began to set over the cliffs. Then Melita told Marema, “Let’s leave the meat and fruit for a while: they can cook slowly over the coals while we take a dip in the stream and wash with fresh flowing water and put on our best clothes.”

Marema accompanied her, amazed, after they’d finished showering, when Melita opened a vial of precious perfume she had brought and suddenly poured it over both her own and Marema’s hair, saying as she did so, “I want both of us to look like brides.”

Returning to the cave, Melita then hurriedly laid the table, setting out jugs of wines of various colors, fruits bedded on leaves, sauces for the meat, and pie crusts in clay dishes. Then she lit lights, turned down the bed, and, dressed in the most luxurious clothes, stood between the table and the bed. She told Marema, “Quickly, put up the ladder and go and tell Prudentius that I’m inviting him to come down.”

Marema instantly did as she was told, but when she entered the upper cave to fetch Prudentius, she saw how horribly skeletal he was—no longer sitting but lying, and able to answer questions only with a very slow mumble. He just waved his hand in silence to indicate that nothing but the hunger that had brought him to the brink of death meant anything to him.

Melita’s long-awaited invitation failed to bring him back to life and gave him no joy.

“But this is the hour for you to rejoice!” Marema told him. But he just dismissed her with a wave of his hand, turned aside, and whispered, “What . . . did you . . . do with . . . the seagull . . . egg?”

“No need to bother about a seagull egg . . . a wonderful banquet awaits you and . . . and even more wonderful caresses from Melita! Get to your feet quickly—I’ll help you climb down the ladder.”

He tried to get up but swayed, fell, and said, “I’m too weak.”

Energetically, Marema seized Prudentius like a child with her strong arms, carried him down the ladder, lowered him to the ground, and, giving him time to recover, supported him as she led him

toward the entrance of the cave, illuminated by the lights that surrounded Melita, whose person and garments shone brilliantly. She greeted Prudentius with an affectionate smile and told him in a loving voice, “Welcome, my master Prudentius! Come in and be the proud owner of everything you see. You have endured an ordeal, and so I surrender to you every right over me. A feast is ready . . . the final dishes are cooking over a slow fire, and the marriage bed is ready . . . and I await my master!”

With these words, Melita stretched out both arms to Prudentius, but he turned away and, his eyes darting as if his sight had dimmed, he exclaimed impatiently, “Wait! Tell me where’s that wild bird’s egg?”

“I smashed it,” replied Melita. “Go and rest on the bed, my master . . . I’ve made it for you, my master . . . And after that you will be eating the most delicious dishes.”

“Oh, that’s of no importance! Serve me now everything boiling or baking over there!”

“The dishes are not quite ready.”

“Then what’s this steaming in the clay dish?”

“It’s a sauce for the beans and pie crust for the boiled meat.”

“Then I’ll eat all this sauce now and the pie crusts too.”

He pulled the dish of sauce closer and began licking it and gnawing at the pie crust, paying no attention at all to Melita, who meanwhile quietly retreated and finally vanished. Prudentius and Marema searched for her on the cliff top, but in vain. Not only had she disappeared: so had the sloop hidden in the cove, and now Prudentius and Marema were cut off from the rest of the world.

In vain they ran to every corner of the cliff, searching for Melita: there was no doubt that she had abandoned them and gone into hiding.

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They were left on their own and saw nobody else, until one day the two voices of Marema’s newborn twins cried out next to her. That day Prudentius went down to the shore with a bundle of linen that he had to wash for his twins and for Marema: he noticed a dot at sea that seemed to have changed its position. A few days after that Prudentius saw something that seemed to have been inscribed with a sharp instrument in the clay of a cliff right over the bay. It read, “Melita greets Prudentius, Marema, and their children and wishes them harmony and a virtuous life.” A month later Prudentius saw that the sloop had come nearer and that it carried two women, and from behind the rocks another sloop approached it. One woman moved to this second sloop. The boat that had brought the two women began to move away, while the boat with one woman on it was approaching the cliffs.

Prudentius could soon tell by the boat’s color that it was his and Alcaeus’s, which had disappeared the same night Melita had left. Prudentius told Marema, who was sitting next to him on the seashore, holding a healthy, swarthy baby on each of her knees, each baby taking hold of one of its mother’s breasts, sucking so greedily that the milk came back through its lips and big white drops slid down Marema’s dark-skinned breasts. But Marema no longer noticed, because she was keeping an eye on the boat. Suddenly she shouted, “Dear Prudentius, rejoice! Your mother, the widow Euphrosyne, is coming toward us . . . We shan’t be left on our own here, and the children won’t grow up to be savages.”

“Yes,” Prudentius replied, “I see now it’s my mother, the widow Euphrosyne! Who gave her our sloop and who showed her how to reach us?”

“Melita, of course. It was she on the other sloop with her friend Erminia . . . They’re Christians.”

Prudentius became pensive; he was following with his eye the approach of the boat that the widow Euphrosyne, despite her age, could still sail skillfully. Then he leaned over to Marema and said, “Now everyone who has a passion for enjoying life always argues that the Galilean’s teachings are no use in life. But cast your mind to everything that has happened to us, and you’ll see that Melita saw further ahead than anyone. Compared with her I’m so weak in spirit that I couldn’t keep up with her. How fortunate it is that she didn’t tie herself up in matrimony with a mediocrity like me! Given our differences in outlook and thoughts, we wouldn’t have found peace and harmony in our union, whereas you and I are happy. Her spirit is too noble and serious—it is too merciless in its repression of the flesh. Whereas you and I . . . we take a simpler view of things . . . I don’t know how it happened that I felt so strong a love for Melita, and now I can see that she is not akin to me, and I am far fonder of you than of Melita. I intended to hide away here with Melita forever—but afterward it’s been so good with you here, and now, too . . . but all the same I’m pleased that my mother has found us and we shan’t stay here permanently cut off from people. My thoughts have turned full circle, everything has changed for us, as Melita predicted. True, we have to trust her utterly.”

“Yes, she’s a clever woman.”

“We have to consider the spirit, not the flesh, as the true lord of life and not live for feelings that

incline us to separate ourselves from other people . . .”

“True, Prudentius.”

“So be it, even we are disinclined to do so . . . we don’t have to be on our own side. If we sin, we shan’t excuse ourselves by making girdles out of leaves, because hiding is worse than enduring a condemnation you deserve.”

“I agree,” responded Marema.

“Yes, you and I always agree! What good luck for both of us!”

“And for our two children.” Marema pointed to the babies, whom their grandmother, the widow Euphrosyne, had now spotted from afar: she began to smile at everyone, and, finally dropping her oar, she shouted, “What fine children! I’ve never seen such lovely ones.”

1891

Translated by Donald Rayfield

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

This introduction incorporates a substantial part of Robert Chandler's introduction to Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk *(London: Hesperus, 2003).*

1. One graphic demonstration of this was in the freezing night of September 19, 1873, when Aleksei Suvorin, soon to be a major publisher and newspaper tycoon, turned up at Leskov's apartment, without boots or a coat, barely able to speak: he had walked two miles from a hotel room where he had found his wife dying of a revolver wound inflicted by her lover in a suicide pact. Leskov wrapped Suvorin in a bearskin coat, put him in a carriage, and sent him off into the care of better-equipped friends.

LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK

1. The inner bark of birch and linden trees was used to make footwear, matting, and many other things. [R. C.]
2. Saint Theodore Stratelates (AD 281–319) was a powerful general under the Roman tetrarch Licinius (r. AD 308–325). He was secretly a Christian, and at a pageant held in his honor by Licinius, he destroyed a number of gold pagan idols. Theodore was tortured and martyred for his faith, and he was subsequently canonized and proclaimed the patron saint of soldiers. [R. C.]
3. The wealthiest merchants belonged to the first guild, the next most wealthy to the second guild, and the least wealthy to the third guild. Members of the first and second guilds, unlike members of the third guild, were exempt from physical punishment. [R. C.]
4. A Russian dictionary gives this as a folk variant of Khiona, derived from the Greek word for snow: chion. It is possible that Leskov was familiar with it as a Scottish name. In either case, however, the significance of the name is unclear. [R. C.]
5. Sonya is a common diminutive of the name Sofya. Sonetka, however, is extremely uncommon. Leskov is playing on the word's other meaning: a small hand bell. Everything about her is bright and bell-like. [R. C.]
6. These stockings, despite the arrows, have nothing to do with prison uniform. Bolkhov is a small town known for its handicrafts, not far from the town where Katerina Lvovna had lived as a married woman. [R. C.]

THE SEALED ANGEL

1. Old Believers were Russian Orthodox Christians who rejected Patriarch Nikon's reforms in the 1650s, when he brought the church liturgy back in line with Greek practices. The Old Believers were often persecuted, sometimes violently; they rejected the church's authority and, in most cases, had no hierarchies of their own. In many areas of Russia, however, they were valued as craftsmen and as honest traders. [D. R.]
2. A town in western Russia, founded by Old Believers in 1707, famous for printing Old Believer literature. [D. R.]
3. A town near the Belarus border, founded by Old Believers in 1702. [D. R.]
4. The verbs *buy* and *sell* were taboo for Old Believers trading in icons. [D. R.]
5. Remphan was the Babylonian name for the god and planet Saturn. [D. R.]

THE ENCHANTED WANDERER

1. Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy (1817–1875) wrote fine poems and verse plays on historical, religious, and legendary themes, as well as acute satires. He was not closely related to the novelist Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. [D. R.]
2. The bells of Malines (Mechelen, Belgium) have long been world famous for their carillons. ("The sweetest bells that ever pealed, / The deepest bells that ever rung, / The lightest bells that ever sung."—Henry van Dyke) [D. R.]

THE STEEL FLEA

1. The Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) was held after the defeat of Napoleon; it established a balance of power in Europe that was to last until 1848. Alexander I died in 1825 and was succeeded as tsar by his brother Nicholas I. [R. C.]
2. Matvey Ivanovich Platov (1751–1818), a general in the Russian army and a Cossack hetman, accompanied Tsar Alexander I to London. [W. E.]
3. The "correct" name of this sculpture is the Apollo Belvedere. A Roman copy of a Greek original, it has itself been copied many times. [R. C.]
4. The central Russian city of Tula was famous for its gunsmiths. [R. C.]
5. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a sugar factory in Petersburg owned by a certain Ya. N. Molvo. Apparently this name was a Russified form of the French name Mollevaut. If this supposition is true, then the irony of Platov's patriotic Russian defense of "Mollevaut" sugar becomes all the sweeter. [W. E.]
6. Count A. A. Bobrinsky owned a sugar refinery in southern Russia during the 1830s. [W. E.]
7. "Father Fedot" was not made up out of thin air. Before his death in Taganrog, Tsar Alexander I did go to confession to the priest Alexey *Fedotov*-Chekhovsky, who was known after that as "Confessor to His Majesty" and loved to call everybody's attention to this completely chance occurrence. This *Fedotov*-Chekhovsky is apparently the legendary "Father Fedot." [N. L.]
8. Zhukov tobacco, a popular brand in Russia during the first half of the nineteenth century, was manufactured in Petersburg in a factory owned by Vasily Zhukov. [W. E.]
9. A long Turkish tobacco pipe. [W. E.]
10. Count Karl Vasilyevich Nesselrode (1780–1862) was Russia's minister of foreign affairs from 1816 to 1856. [W. E.]
11. A port town at the mouth of the Western Dvina River. [W. E.]
12. Count Peter Andreyevich Kleinmichel (1793–1869) served from 1842 to 1855 as chief administrator of highways and public buildings. [W. E.]
13. General Ivan Nikitich Skobelev (1778–1849) was commandant in 1839 of the Fortress of Peter and Paul in Petersburg, which was used as a prison. [W. E.]
14. Martyn Dmitriyevich Solsky (1798–1881) was an army doctor and a member of the medical council of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. [W. E.]
15. Alexander Ivanovich Chernyshov (1786–1857) served as minister of war from 1827 to 1852. [W. E.]
16. Echoes of Pushkin's poem "Ruslan i Lyudmila." [W. E.]

THE UNMERCENARY ENGINEERS

1. *The Life of Bishop Ignati Brianchaninov* says that the grand duke "ordered the cadet to come to the palace," but General Pavel Fiodorovich Fermor, Brianchaninov's fellow pupil, recalls Nicholas "took Brianchaninov with him." [N. L.]
2. On page 15 of the biography of Brianchaninov there is a mention of the fact that "at the time a variety of religious ideas affected the northern capital and were the source of disputes and competition," but there is no indication of what relevance this competition had for Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov, although it must have been relevant to them. Oral indications that they read Metropolitan Bishop Mikhail's work are perfectly plausible. [N. L.]. See *The Biography of Bishop Ignati [lay name Dmitri] Brianchaninov, composed by his closest pupils, with letters from his Grace to persons close to him*, published anonymously in 1881 in St. Petersburg (a facsimile was published in 2018). [D.R.]
3. The story that Brianchaninov and Chikhachiov were close friends of Viktor seems odd and almost improbable. They were known to visit a *confessor* at the monastery, and persons who wished to discourage them from excessive piety made great efforts to do so. May one not conclude that the youths themselves were trying to hide the identity of the person they were seeing at the monastery, and that their comrades believed they were visiting that jolly fellow Viktor? [N. L.]
4. Andrei Muraviov (1806–1874) was the fearsome chief secretary of the Holy Synod. [D. R.]

5. Mikhail Lesnitsky, a graduate of Moscow's theological academy, was a parish priest and then court priest at the Winter Palace, later court priest monk and from 1818 the metropolitan bishop of Petersburg. He died on March 24, 1821. His works are still loved and valued highly by many readers, but they are seldom found for sale. Experts, however, find that they have serious defects. [N. L.]
6. This part of the story is quite at odds with what can be read in the biography of Brianchaninov, where it is presented as a legend portraying as graphically as can be the young people's departure from the lay world. Nevertheless, the story remains and is believed as it is, even if the book renders it differently. [N. L.]
7. General Mikhail Kutuzov (1745–1813) was victorious when Napoleon invaded Russia; his descendants enjoyed enormous prestige in military circles. [D. R.]
8. In fact Brianchaninov did not come to Babayki until the end of his monastic career, while Chikhachiov spent only a very short time there to see his friend. [N. L.]
9. This conversation took place in Petersburg, not Moscow. [N. L.]
10. There are indications of this in the *Biography* (see note 2; pages 65, 67). [N. L.]
11. Pavel Fermor later rose to considerable heights in his service career: he became the head of the military-legal academy, which had been formed from the Auditors' College. [N. L.]
12. Guber (1814–1847) was a Russian poet and a translator of Goethe. [D. R.]
13. The shy hero of a poem by the Romantic poet Vasily Zhukovsky. [D. R.]
14. Bitter water was a mineral water from Bohemia (Czech Republic), high in magnesium sulfate. [D. R.]
15. The rank of secret counselor was then the third highest in the Russian civil service. [D. R.]